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THE WORLD'S LEAST INTERESTING MASTER SWORDSMAN
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Chapter 1 — Before Departure

Part 1 — Grave Marker

The two of us, my master and I, make our way to the eastern edge of Caputo. Any further east and we'd end up in the Domino Republic. It's not as though there's any problem with us going to Domino, but neither of us have any reason to go there.

Our destination today is this space right here at the border between the two countries, the land where my master and his brother had fought only a few days earlier. At that spot, my master is building a memorial to his brother. It's a simple memorial crafted solely out of stone, and my master is building it entirely by hand.

I think about the two Immortals who had sacrificed thousands of years on the altar of training, and the barren wastelands born in the wake of their titanic struggle. The land had already been deformed once by Shouzo's magic, but it's now even more blighted than it had been before the battle.

Well, I say that, but in terms of physical appearance, it didn't look that much worse. My master has already fixed most of the cosmetic damage. However, even a novice Immortal like myself can tell that there are deeper, lasting scars below the surface. The ki lingering in the area is a mess, and there's far too much of it mixed into the land and the air above. If left in its present state, this entire region is going to be engulfed in natural disasters.

I have no way of knowing whether the disasters are going to be earthquakes or abnormal weather, or even some mix of both, but I do know once they start, they'll continue until someone clears the area of this warped ki. In a few decades, the ki imbalance will spiral out of control, growing steadily worse until the area is nothing more than a festering abscess.

That said, while it's a potentially serious problem over an extended period of time, the imbalance is still relatively harmless and much easier to deal with at the moment. That is probably why my master chose this particular moment to build the memorial and settle the ki imbalance.

Once my master finishes the memorial, the knotted mess of ki engulfing the area slowly begins to untangle. It's still going to take a bit of time for the ki in the area to be completely restored, but that's probably better for the local environment than shocking it abruptly back to normalcy.

"So, this is what you wanted to do, Master."

"Yes. Before it slips my mind."

The warped ki engulfing the area is steadily clearing. By contrast, my master's expression remains clouded. Yes, the memorial is fulfilling a useful and much-needed purpose, and yet it isn't actually able to fulfill its greatest purpose—bringing peace to the soul of the slain Immortal, Fukei. My master's hope in building the memorial had been to give repose to his brother's soul.

"…"

Since I had never met my master's brother apprentice, I can't imagine what his reaction to the memorial might be. Yet, based on what's transpired, it's hard to believe that he'd find any kind of peace from my master's memorial. My master is well aware of this, and that makes this whole funeral something of a tragic farce.

"Sansui."

"Yes, Master."

"Don't end up like this."

Usually, when those words are uttered in front of a grave during a funeral, it's natural to assume that they refer to the person entombed in the grave itself, but that isn't the case this time. My master's words are referring not to the deceased, but rather to himself. He's admonishing me so that I don't end up like him, a man who can't find forgiveness from the dead. I can easily understand what's going on in his heart.

"Don't end up like me… A useless shell of a man who does nothing but make mistakes that can't be fixed."

My master had always been driven to be stronger than anyone else—to the extent that no one ever really matched him in that ambition. He'd spent thousands of years in that pursuit. Just how hard is it to admit after all that time, all that training, that ultimately he, and only he, is to blame for all the damage he's caused through his millennia of life?

Worse, that admission doesn't bring salvation, but instead just more suffering. Despite that, my master has accepted it all and has chosen to live with it. It would be so much easier for him if he could just act like Ran, without a care for anyone's feelings or well-being.

"Promise me… I don't ask that you live a faultless life…but don't live a life filled only with fault."

"I promise, Master."

My master turns his back to the memorial. His heart is near breaking and he can't handle any more grief. Building the memorial and seeing it in front of him has brought to mind just what his brother would say to him if he could be here to speak—all the criticism, the admonishments, the blame.

My master is a victor who has fallen into a profound depression imagining the words of his now eternally silent and vanquished opponent. At this moment, he's a pitiful man who appears far from the world's most powerful individual.

"Apologies for making you visit a grave with an old man. But I…I wanted you to see my most shameful failure. I tried to be a good teacher for you, but at the same time, that meant hiding my true self."

I've met and interacted with various people who had known my master in the centuries past, such as his long-time companion, the Legendary Sword Eckesachs. Each encounter served as a stark reminder of just how little I knew about my master.

It goes without saying that, as the strongest swordsman in the world, there were countless stories of my master's exploits—but he has always

hidden them from me. He is too ashamed of his past deeds to speak of them in my presence.

“This pitiful and weak man is who your master truly is. Remember that.”

“Yes, Master.”

“I had planned to retrain you when you returned to the woods. There are plenty of techniques I have yet to teach you. No—I planned, if anything, to start teaching you my Arts when you returned… But… I’m exhausted.”

My master has spent millennia devoting himself to his training. He has been able to maintain his training regime, his desire to learn, and all the sacrifice that dedication required, despite never having lost a fight in his life. Yet, even my master’s dedication has now wavered, suffering under the weight of having learned that his senior disciple had hated him for centuries and—an even heavier blow—ending that person by his own hand.

“Sansui, I haven’t mentioned it to you, but I have already taught you my ultimate technique.”

“Your…ultimate technique…”

“Suiboku-Style Immortal Arts, Art of War: Ultimate Technique, Ten Bulls of Enlightenment, Tenth Stage of Enlightenment, First Truth of the Immortal’s Self-Salvation, State of No Doubt. It’s the ultimate technique, the final answer I arrived at in my pursuit of battle techniques…”

My master regretfully, apologetically, reveals the truth to me.

“And it’s the answer that I could have arrived at without hurting anyone, without tormenting anyone, had I simply devoted myself entirely to training.”

He declares that all of the killing, all of the fighting, all of his life, had ultimately been for nothing.

“Of all that I’ve taught you, the most important thing is the truth of my own life. It should be enough to satisfy me… And the fact that I want to teach you more, the fact that I find joy in being your master, no doubt all of that is simply conceit on my part.”

I understand at that moment that my master intends to die.

“Master, I… I…still have much to learn. I have much I still want to learn from you, Master.”

Only a few days ago, he taught me an important lesson. I’m still far too weak compared to my master, and my own mindset is still far from reaching the heights he attained. I still want his guidance.

“Heh… Don’t get ahead of yourself. Yes, I intend to leave this world, but…not just yet.”

With that, my master looks toward the Caputo fortress city. Or rather, he’s looking toward the Arcana Kingdom, the mortal realm that had been dragged into a conflict between two Immortals.

“More than anything, I need to make amends to this kingdom. You serve them, after all, and they were caught in the battle between Fukei and myself. To leave this world behind without making amends would be the epitome of selfishness.”

Having taught me his ultimate technique, my master appears to feel that his time as a warrior is coming to an end. But, as an Immortal, he still feels the need to atone for the sins of his brother apprentice.

“Further... I’ve already chosen where I plan to die. My homeland, Hanafuda. It’s a land with many Immortals, and the next place you’ll train.”

“Then…?”

“Yes... Once I have finished atoning for my sins in this kingdom, I will take you to those lands. Once I’ve handed your training off to an Immortal I can trust, I intend to…end my life in front of you.”

He wears the serene expression of one who has already made peace with his end. I understand at that moment that there’s nothing I can do to stop him.

“Which is why I intend to wait until you have time away from your mortal commitments. You now carry responsibilities, after all. It wouldn’t feel right to take you away from those.”

As such, he intends to provide for the Arcana Kingdom’s safety until I’m next free. I feel a jumble of emotions that I can’t fully process at the moment. I can’t even imagine training under any Immortal other than my master.

However, my master has already been guiding me for five hundred years. I don’t feel comfortable asking him to spend even more of his time on my personal development. Therefore, letting him go, even though I regret his decision, is probably the best thing I can do for him as his apprentice.

“Now, Sansui. What work is on your plate?”

“I have two main tasks at the moment. One will be finished rather quickly, but I think the other will take some time.”

Until recently, I had served as Lady Douve’s bodyguard. That particular duty didn’t leave me a lot of free time, but I could have gotten out of it if I had wanted to. Unfortunately, the jobs I’m tasked with now aren’t so easy to set down.

“First, the students I’ve been teaching will be taking jobs as swordsmen. As their teacher, I have a duty to watch them make their way in the world.”

“I see. Yes, that’s quite important.”

“The other is a journey to the Magyan Kingdom. We need to report the engagement of Lady Douve and Tahlan, as well as Sunae and Saiga. I’m no longer Lady Douve’s bodyguard, but I will be accompanying them as Tahlan’s master, so…”

“I see, I see… That sounds like a joyous occasion as well.”

My master nods along, clearly reveling in the happiness of people he knows. To me, it’s somewhat bittersweet.

“Neither your employer nor your students are strangers to me. I’d like to do whatever I can for them.”

Because, you see, my master has given up on realizing any happiness for himself.

Part 2 — Bestowal

No matter how much training anyone does under me, it's still not an actual profession. As such, my students need to get out in the field and get paying jobs.

"You did well to protect my sister during the recent battle with Fukei. I'm very grateful to all of you, both as her brother and as the lord of House Sepaeda."

His Brothership, the lord of House Sepaeda, has me and my master standing next to him, addressing all of my students for an announcement. I can't help but feel the hand of fate in us all being assembled here, at the Sepaeda Estate where I first met His Brothership.

Of course, we might just be here because we're in the capital and there's no other place to hold this sort of gathering. Remarkably, though this is ordinarily a place reserved for the elite, none of my students are nervous at just being here.

"Now, allow me to get to the point. My sister and Tahlan will soon be married. It goes without saying that there is a need to go get permission from Tahlan's parents. I cannot go, but my father will accompany my sister and Tahlan to Magyan to meet with Tahlan's parents. Sansui will be accompanying them on that journey."

Obviously, all of my students are already aware of this. They have all prepared themselves for this day.

"I'd like you all to use this opportunity to consider your own future. Will you accompany Tahlan as my sister's bodyguards, or will you go to serve vassals of House Sepaeda? At the very least… We can't simply have you dedicate yourself only to training, with service rendered only during emergencies."

Until now, House Sepaeda has been supporting them, providing both a place to live and a small daily stipend. However, that was all an investment to prepare them for future employment. This talk is the result of His Brothership and His Fathership determining that my students are now ready to serve House Sepaeda.

"But first, I have several things to give you."

With that, His Brothership produces a substantial sheaf of paper. Each of the documents is lavishly decorated with ribbon, and it's easy to tell the contents are special.

"I've written you letters of introduction for the various noble families. In these letters, I certify in my name that you've trained under Sansui."

As his words indicate, they're essentially licenses. In that sense, the letters are worth more than their lives. For His Brothership to hand these out to all of the people present means that he'll attest to each individual's character and their history.

It has the full weight of his name behind it. All of my students, who have never had anything to their own names, are about to receive official

sanction. Just as importantly, it's going to be given to them by the current Lord Sepaeda. Framing it in rather coarse terms, it means that they can show this piece of paper to any of the vassal houses of House Sepaeda and get a job.

"The letters I'm providing you have my personal signature on them, and we have a separate record of each of your names. This means you now have both positions of power and of responsibility," His Brothership says with a stern expression. "If any of you behave like thugs with this power, you're dishonoring not just me, but Sansui as well. I want you to fully understand what this means."

The warning makes them tear up. Not with fear, but happiness. They're all individuals who swore that they'd secure a place for themselves in the world with their swordsmanship, and after all of their hard work, they're about to earn the trust of one of the Four Great Houses. It means that they've achieved their dreams, even if none of them has become the kingdom's greatest swordsman.

"Let me be clear," His Brothership smiles maliciously, evidently deciding that his warning hadn't frightened them sufficiently, and points to me. "I'll have this man take responsibility and send him to kill you."

They shudder and the color drains from their faces. They not only understand the sheer gap in skill between us, but also that His Brothership and I are more than willing to actually carry out that threat.

"Sansui, surely you wouldn't say no?"

"Of course not, my lord. I, Sansui Shirokuro, will atone with my sword if any of my apprentices dishonor the name of House Sepaeda."

That's my role, after all. As the one who trained them, it's my responsibility to kill them if they cross the line with their newfound strength.

"I would also like to present you all with a letter. I understand that you may not consider yourselves worthy yet, but I guarantee that you've all achieved a certain level of skill. It may not have the value of the letter of introduction from His Lordship, but it would please me if you would carry my letter anyway."

One of the things I've picked up during my time with House Sepaeda is how to write this kingdom's alphabet. I came up with the text of each letter on my own and wrote them by hand. When writing each letter, the particular student's face would appear before me, and the realization that I was writing a letter that signified their progress inevitably brought a stirring of emotion and the sting of tears to my eyes.

"I look forward to watching as you reach further heights of skill and ability."

Of course, depending on their behavior, I might need to kill them. Such are the risks inherent in a life dedicated to the blade.

"I hope and pray that I'll never have to kill any of the people who take this letter from me."

They start to tremble, but if a little bit of intimidation is all that's needed to keep them on the straight and narrow, it's a small price to pay. They're all about to set off on the next stage of their lives, one that should be full of promise and advancement, but also one filled with temptation. It really is important to drive home the risks of giving into that temptation before they set off.

"Now, my turn."

Finally, my master speaks up. At that, both His Brothership and I straighten up; it goes without saying that my students also pull themselves together.

"First, forgive me for rejoicing in the fact that my apprentice, Sansui, has become a teacher in the way of the sword, and is now in the position of watching his own students set off for their further exploits," my master says, starting out with a painfully embarrassing statement. Even though this is a graduation ceremony of sorts for my students, he's celebrating my growth more than theirs.

"Thinking back on it, when God sent Sansui to me five hundred years ago…I honestly considered it a bother. I asked myself, 'Why do I have to train this mere mortal?' But, as one who received Eckesachs from God only to abandon her later, I certainly owed Him a great debt, so I took on the task of training Sansui."

Please stop. This is agonizing.

"But, when I actually started training him, it brought back all kinds of memories of my time under my own master with Fukei; seeing myself in him, I began to think of Sansui as my son. I have no words for just how moving it was when he finally achieved the heights of my ultimate technique…"

Seeing my mortification, the people around me smirk at my discomfort. It really is embarrassing. I wish he'd stop.

"At any rate, the reason I was able to send Sansui out into the world without shame was because he had reached those heights. If he hadn't reached that level, I would have accompanied him, despite how embarrassing it would be for me to do so. After all, there is no greater shame for an Immortal than to send an unskilled apprentice out into the world."

All of the students present had been, with Tahlan and his companions, witnesses to my master's battle. All of them say that I'm capable of fighting in the same way as my master. None of them are in any way disappointed after comparing me to my master.

"As such, I understand both your concerns and Sansui's reservations. I fully comprehend just how unsettling it is to send out apprentices to the world even though they might not be ready, and how much weight there is on your shoulders given how famous your master is."

My master finally starts into the meat of his speech. It is certainly undeniable that society is going to have high expectations of my students.

“They’re Sansui Shirokuro’s apprentices, so they should be able to do the same things that he can do.” And, of course, they’ll be disappointed if it turns out that they can’t.

“Now, it’s not a simple matter for you to reach Sansui’s heights. With that said, what is there to do?”

My master unwraps a large cloth parcel. Inside are enough weapons and armor to equip all of my students.

“There’s nothing wrong with relying upon your equipment while you work on your skills. When I was young, I relied upon Eckesachs, and before that, I used equipment of the type you see here.”

To ordinary eyes, the items probably just look like the work of an amateur. However, as an Immortal, I can tell that all of the items are infused with my master’s ki.

His Brothership had heard about these gifts in advance, so there’s no skepticism in his expression. No, he’s just very tense.

“These are items crafted by an Immortal, known as noble treasures. To put it in simple terms, anyone bearing these items can use the Immortal Arts.”

At that, my students appear shocked, and understandably so. Having seen my master’s Immortal Arts, they’re probably thinking of his power as the baseline for what Immortal Arts techniques are like.

“Of course, their power has its limits. If you were to hand any of them to a random person, they wouldn’t be able to make full use of it. But…since Sansui vouches for all of you as swordsmen, you should be able to make use of them.”

Having divided the items into individual sets, my master hands them out to each student.

“I shall teach you how to use them until it’s time for Sansui to depart. And once you’ve mastered how to use these items…”

My master, the world’s strongest man, quirks his lips in an ominous smile.

“You’ll appear just as capable as Sansui to your average onlooker.”

The gathering moves outside for a demonstration of my master’s newly crafted equipment. We go to the clearing where I had once been tested by members of the Sepaeda family, and when we arrive, Tahlan is waiting for us, already wearing my master’s equipment.

“Tahlan has had these items for several days. As might be expected of him, he’s already mastered their use.”

None of the noble treasures my master’s made look particularly nice, but just the fact that Tahlan’s wearing them gives them a wild sort of charm. Of course, if we were to equip them, we’d probably just look like savages or, at best, armed peasants.

“The surcoat is called the Great Sage: armor crafted of grass and stone. The two weapons hanging on his hip are Gan Jiang and Mo Ye. The names are a bit excessive, but think of them as tough, lightweight equipment.”

The items that stand out most are the weapons and armor. To mortals they probably appear roughly crafted, but I know they’re infused with Ki Blade.

Now, Ki Blade is an Immortal Arts technique that hardens a blade by infusing it with ki, and it works on everything from my own wooden sword to steel blades. Moreover, if I wanted to, I could perform the technique on any item I’m holding in my hand. In my case, though, it only lasts as long as I hold the object in my hand. I certainly can’t permanently infuse an item.

However, the noble treasures my master has crafted will maintain their Ki Infusion even once they leave his hand, and they’ll still be ki infused after they’ve been given out and used by Tahlan and the others.

It’s not just a crude work-around. All of the noble treasures, not just the weapons and armor, are crafted from materials that come from the woods my master has called home for the last fifteen hundred years. The wood has absorbed centuries’ worth of my master’s ki, while the stone has been absorbing my master’s ki for the entire period of his residence there. Since he crafted the items out of those materials, it wouldn’t surprise me if they could maintain the infused Immortal Arts techniques for centuries.

“Of course, lightness on its own isn’t enough in a weapon, and no doubt they’ll shatter if enough force is applied to them. Frankly, they’re not that powerful as weapons go.”

Still, I know the limits of Ki Infusion. It does harden the weapon, but it doesn’t make the weapon indestructible. And a lighter weapon means that it does less damage. In a straight-up clash of blades, a lighter weapon doesn’t necessarily confer an advantage.

“Just think of these as bonuses that come with the other items. Now, shall we actually try them?”

“Yes, sir!”

Tahlan draws his stone blade with a tense expression.

The stone making up the blades of Gan Jiang and Mo Ye appears to have been partially ground and then flaked, and there’s no difference between them other than their length. Gan Jiang is a short sword suited for one-handed use, while Mo Ye is a blade long enough to be used two-handed.

They aren’t intended to be wielded together; rather, they’re meant to be used according to the amount of available space, or with one serving as a spare in case the other breaks. This is a wide-open space, so Tahlan naturally has Mo Ye in hand as he drops into a stance.

“Worry not, Tahlan. Hit me with everything you have.”

“Yes, sir!”

In contrast to my master, who’s got a gentle smile on his face as he drops into a stance, Tahlan’s features are tense. Tahlan is always careful to

be respectful in my presence, so no doubt he holds Master Suiboku in even higher esteem than myself.

But still, Tahlan is a proper swordsman in his own right. He immediately switches over his mindset and removes any excess tension from his body.

With that, my master, myself, and the others also let out a breath. It's probably best not to make it so obvious, but we can all tell he's readied himself to fight.

"Here I come."

"Mm."

The pair are too far away for a single step and slash—at least, so long as one isn't using any special Arts.

As such, Tahlan slowly closes the distance without using his Shadow Summoning. While there's a bit of tension in his movements, he's not doing anything out of the ordinary.

Tahlan enters my master's effective range. My master draws back normally and steps in with an ordinary blow.

"Yah!"

With just a step, in the space of an eyeblink, Tahlan lunges forward explosively. The edge of the stone sword reaches my master's throat before he can execute his counterstroke.

"Remarkable!"

His Brothership lets out a breath in amazement at Tahlan's burst of speed. He isn't the only one. The others are also shocked at the speed of the movement.

"Mm, you were able to find the perfect timing. Well done, Tahlan."

"You honor me."

But Tahlan and I are more surprised at my master. Tahlan hadn't checked his lunge and had, instead, launched a full thrust into my master's throat. My master, having seen how far the thrust would go, had somehow stopped it without bothering to avoid the blow.

The technique involved is one of my master's ultimate techniques, the highest expression of Feather Step. Using that technique, he instantly robs an object touching him of its weight and completely nullifies the momentum from the blow. Still, being surprised at that move isn't the point of this exercise, so Tahlan and I don't touch upon that fact.

"This is an Immortal Art known as Quicken Body. Those of you who witnessed my battle with Fukei saw it several times, but as you can see, it allows the user to move with extraordinary speed."

He says it so simply, but it's an amazing effect. Though my master had easily stopped it with his own Immortal Arts, the students and His Brothership, watching the exchange from a distance, weren't able to react at all to Tahlan while he was in motion. They're still standing there staring in awe at the sheer speed Tahlan had achieved.

“It makes you faster, but it doesn’t make you as fast as a Spirit Summoner or a Marked, and the speed doesn’t increase your strength in any way. Furthermore, you’ll quickly tire if you use it for too long.”

Spirit Summoners and berserkers improve all of their physical abilities. Not only do they become stronger and faster, but they’re also physically much tougher. By contrast, Quicken Body only increases the user’s speed. In addition, if a Spirit Summoner can go from a speed of ten and increase it to twenty, Quicken Body might increase someone with a speed of ten to about fifteen.

“There’s also an Art called Strengthen Body that improves strength. I’ve also given you a noble treasure called a Sash of Might that has that effect, just as Tahlan’s Sash of Speed confers Quicken Body, but the amount of improvement is similar in both cases.”

My master is swift to reinforce the point that the noble treasures he’s giving them aren’t items that guarantee invincibility. There’s no need to doubt his sincerity; at the same time, though, it’s also true that everyone present was caught off guard by Tahlan’s speed. They might be slow compared to a Spirit Summoner or berserker, but against an ordinary opponent who couldn’t increase their physical abilities, it’s more than enough.

“Still, so long as you remain in this kingdom, it’s unlikely that you’ll face a Spirit Summoner or a berserker. As such, it’ll be more than effective against those who use magic or the Mystic Arts. The more problematic issue is that you’ll tire quickly when using them. That won’t be a problem if you’re facing a single opponent, but you’ll need to plan carefully if you’re facing a large number of opponents.”

Like Tahlan had just demonstrated, the standard use for these items will probably involve the wearer momentarily activating the item when attacking and keeping it in reserve otherwise. Considering that the boost it provides is also immediate, that is an extremely effective way to use them. The same goes for facing a large number of opponents. It’s probably best that they refrain from using their sheer speed to confuse the enemy.

“The ultimate technique that I developed and passed on to my apprentice is one that involves one’s mind. By mastering the use of these items, you’ll approach Sansui’s realm by grasping how to think in battle.”

Hearing those words, the expressions on Tahlan and the other students’ faces tighten. Even if the noble treasures are items that let anyone use the Immortal Arts, they’re not items that can make just anyone invincible. That is why there’s a purpose to mastering their use. Learning how to use them will allow the students to make the most of their daily training and help them take the next step in their development.

My master is telling them that the items aren’t simply tools to help them defeat their enemies, or to protect their or my reputation.

“Now, one more thing to show. Allow us to demonstrate the most difficult item to craft among my noble treasures. Tahlan.”

“Yes sir!”

The tension drains from Tahlan’s features and he smiles. The little wooden wheels on his ankles begin turning. With that, his body floats up and stops there, as though he’s standing upon invisible ground. It’s clearly not just a Feather Step; instead, it’s meant for airborne combat.

“This is a Wind-Fire Wheel, a noble treasure that allows you to move through the air as though you’re walking upon land. It takes quite a bit of practice to use effectively, but unlike the Sash of Speed or the Sash of Might, it’s not as physically taxing. Just floating is easy enough, so give it a try, all of you.”

At my master’s urging, all of my students place their Wind-Fire Wheels on their ankles. Although they’re skeptical at first, when they put a bit of strength into their ankles, they begin to gently float into the air. Initially, they float around cautiously, staying close to the ground, but slowly they begin to climb higher as they get more familiar with the sensation and find joy in moving freely through the air.

In this kingdom, only the most skilled magic users like the Royal Guards and Blois can fly, and even they are only able to do so after putting a great deal of effort into mastering the technique. They might find themselves deflated watching this scene. Or, rather, I’m finding *myself* deflated.

It took me a long long time to master Feather Step, and yet they’ve acquired a technique that’s probably even harder than Feather Step. Of course, they’re reliant on an item, but they’re still flying. Frankly, I would have preferred that too. Why hadn’t my master made me any noble treasures?

“Your master really can do anything…”

While His Brothership had already known ahead of time what the noble treasures could do, he’s still completely flabbergasted at how easily my students are now floating around in the air. Of course, it must have taken a long time for my master to learn how to make noble treasures. Still, there’s a limit to how easily he can do just about anything.

Why hadn’t he taught me any of this? Given how often I deal with the frustration of having nothing but my swordsmanship to show for all my training, I couldn’t help but resent my master a bit.

“Sansui… Don’t pout so much! In your case, I’ll actually teach you the technique instead of just giving you a noble treasure!”

Sure, I’m a little excited about getting to learn a new technique, but still, I couldn’t help but think that I’d have been happier with getting a noble treasure when I first started training five hundred years ago. Obviously, I can’t say it out loud, but I’m still really jealous of my students for getting these noble treasures crafted by my master.

Part 3 — Interests

Obviously, my students can't just do all their practice with their new equipment at House Sepaeda's estate. You know, the one located right in the middle of the royal capital. So when they get back together to continue their practice, they're at their usual open-air training area in front of the Academy.

It goes without saying that when someone other than Tahlan puts on the noble treasures, they look like they're just equipped with a bunch of primitive junk. It's surreal to see a group that looks like they've stepped out of the Stone Age floating clumsily around, trying to get their bearings in the air.

In a sense, it's like learning how to swim. I suppose, viewed that way, it's not a good thing to find their practice funny or amusing.

Besides, looking around, the Academy's students are all here to watch. Heck, there are even people who very clearly aren't students or faculty. No doubt they've heard the rumors of items that can make anyone fly and came to see it for themselves.

I can hear spoiled kids begging their parents for a set of their own, as well as the voices of their fathers trying desperately to stop them from approaching Master Suiboku. There's no telling what the king or His Brothership will say if children wander up to my master and start pestering him for noble treasures.

"Mm, it seems there's been quite a stir. Still, that's nothing new, is it? Surely they'll tire of it eventually. There's nothing to feel guilty about, so why don't we focus on our training?"

"As you say…" my master, the cause of all this uproar, replies somewhat lackadaisically.

I suppose it's a minor thing compared to having the great woods floating over the capital. With that in mind, I decide to put my contrary thoughts to one side.

"Now, as for what I'll be teaching you first… We're going to start with Leaden Step."

Leaden Step is an Immortal Art that makes one's own body or something one is touching heavier. It's the reverse of Feather Step, and it works by gathering the weight of one's surroundings to oneself.

"Try it."

"Yes, Master."

I watched my master do it the other day, so I've seen how it's done. I copy what I saw him do to try using the technique. It's the first time I've made the effort, but I somehow manage to pull it off, and I feel my body getting heavier.

"Mm, well done."

"Um, Master. Does this mean you're going to consider me as having learned this technique?"

“Certainly. Well done, dear apprentice, to master it with a single look.”

I only learned four techniques over the course of five hundred years, and now I’ve suddenly learned another one. Just what was the point of those five hundred years?

“Over those five hundred years, you learned the ultimate technique of the heart and mind. You honed your observation skills, your understanding of how things work, and your imagination. With all of those in place, I doubt it’s particularly difficult for you to learn a technique after only seeing it once.”

I understand the logic. Under my master, I learned how to accurately perceive the world. That is why I could handle opponents I faced for the first time perfectly and without hesitation. To some extent, it’s only natural that with those observation skills I can ape a technique after only seeing it once. It’s the same reason why Ran the Berserker can imitate someone’s style after a single fight. Frankly, it’s not fun to know I’m just like her in that respect, but there’s nothing I can do about that.

“For now, I’m only going to show you techniques that you can easily acquire. I’m sure you’re well aware, but the more Immortal Arts you know, the more tactics you’ll have at your disposal. However, that also means that, unless you use your mind more, you’ll end up being easier to read.”

I already understand that from watching Saiga. He can perform more techniques than I can, but that also means how he combines his powers ends up being a lot more simplistic. To constrain my own tactics while increasing the number of things I can do in battle would be completely self-defeating.

“I’m afraid that I can’t watch over your training alone. I’ll show you a few techniques; for now, focus upon practicing them.”

“Yes, Master. Thank you.”

My master is saying things to me that I usually tell my own students. Honestly, it’s quite moving to be on the receiving end for once.

“Now…Tahlan.”

“Yes, sir!”

As expected, my master next addresses Tahlan. As the others struggle to master flying, Tahlan is practicing how to combine Shadow Summoning and Quicken Body. Quicken Body is physically taxing and, as a consequence, Tahlan’s drenched in sweat.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself.”

“I am!”

“I’m glad you’re enjoying my noble treasures, but if you keep that up, you’re going to upset your bride.”

“Th-That’s…”

“Heh. It was only the other day when you fought my brother that you learned the importance of keeping your eye on your surroundings. Yes, putting in effort is good, but too much of it can be poisonous for the rest of your life.”

Tahlan's been so focused on his training that he's starting to tire. While there's nothing wrong with that, it's not a good thing, either, and so my master gently chastises him about it.

"My apologies!"

"No need to overdo the contrition. Training is best when it's fun, but if you neglect a young woman, she might very well grow tired of you."

"Th-That...would be a problem."

"Besides, your enjoyment is making your strokes sloppy. It would be a pity if my noble treasures ruined your swordsmanship. Be careful that there's not a difference in your skill when you are and aren't using the Sash of Speed."

"Thank you, Master Suiboku!"

While it seems like he's just warning Tahlan, his warning also applies to me. Just as Lady Douve is glaring at Tahlan, Blois and Lain are glaring at me. That glare will turn into full-blown anger if I end up so tired that I collapse into a heap and fall asleep when I get home.

Surely it's fortunate to have something other than swordsmanship that requires my time. Still, given how fun it is to learn new things, needing to save my energy is a problem for me, as a man who loves both his calling and his family very much.

Fortunately, that's a good problem, not a bad problem.

The instruction ends before sunset. Because I've taken the Golden Balm, I also start to feel hungry at about this time. Given that, we chose to regroup at Lady Douve's estate. Lady Douve, Tahlan, my master, Blois, Lain and I are now all having dinner together.

"And then he made a point about neglecting you, dear Douve. It seems that everyone else has already caught on to the fact that I'll never be able to say no to you."

"My, my, do you think I'm such a needy woman that I'd try to restrain you like that? If that were the case, I would have just insisted that you stay by my side at all times. How disappointing to learn you think of me as such a grasping woman. This, despite all my efforts to respect your wishes."

Lady Douve dominates all facets of life, and this is no different at the dinner table. The moment Tahlan leaves an opening, she strikes mercilessly to take advantage. It's true that Tahlan is acting this way on purpose, but I'm honestly curious how he doesn't find being with her completely exhausting by itself.

"Oh? You intend to have me constantly at your side? That would be a treat."

"Still, it wouldn't be good for our house's reputation if a man who marries into House Sepaeda does nothing but lay about all day. Perhaps you'll just train constantly while you're with me?"

Lady Douve seems to be both pleased and displeased at once. Tahlan, despite appearing to be on the back foot, looks like he's enjoying the banter.

"I'm a woman with discretion, but if you keep humiliating yourself in front of me, I might very well lose interest and move on."

"That's terrifying to consider."

"I wonder what happens in that case. Does your sister just leave you here and take Saiga with her back to your homeland? I wonder what she'll say when someone asks about you."

I don't want to be rude, but I really don't understand what Tahlan sees in Lady Douve. It's even possible to interpret this conversation as Lady Douve extorting Tahlan by hiding some secret from the public. If they go back to Magyan and behave this way in public, it feels like someone's either going to stick a knife in Lady Douve's back or otherwise attack her outright.

"So, Douve. When will you be departing?" my master asks Lady Douve in the middle of her wordplay.

Of course, he's eating as he does this. There's just something off about seeing my master eat actual food, and it's even more shocking to see that he has proper table manners. Do others feel the same way when they see me eating?

"It'll be in one week. After which, it'll be about a year's journey there and back."

"Mm… I see. Then I should instruct the other one until then."

"Who is 'the other one,' Master?"

"Ran, I think she's called?"

There's a huge gap between my master and I in how we view Ran. I don't think particularly well of her; however, for my master, she's from a village that he destroyed long ago. He hadn't regretted massacring the village's inhabitants at the time, but it seems that he feels quite a bit of remorse now.

"She's had her various run-ins with Sansui, but to me, like Fukei, she's one of my victims. I had to settle other matters first, but I'd like to do something for her."

"That…should be discussed with House Batterabbe."

"Yes, I have no intention of moving without their permission. However, if possible, I'd like to teach her."

There's no reason to deny that request on House Batterabbe's part. If my master makes the effort to go through the proper channels, no doubt they'll accept.

"After that, well… Once I see Sansui and you others off, I intend to visit Tempera Village."

It seems that my master intends to lend his aid to the Arcana Kingdom for the time being, but also wants to go to Tempera Village and apologize. There's no reason for me to stop him, but I feel like they wouldn't want him to visit.

"I see."

Even Lady Douve seems at a loss for a proper response. Or, rather, that seems to be the case with everyone around the table. They're probably all thinking the same thing.

From what I hear, the Temperan seers can gaze into the past as well as the future. As such, even two thousand years after his rampage, they can clearly see what my master did to their village at the time. From the perspective of people who've seen my master go on a killing spree, no matter how contrite he might appear, they probably don't want him anywhere near them.

"Ah, I know what you all want to say. I exiled myself to those woods for that same reason. No doubt if I returned to my homeland, they'd resent my presence."

Still, my master is well aware of that. After all, he'd spent fifteen hundred years in self-exile in a place far from his own home.

"But that's why Fukei appeared, simmering with thousands of years' worth of resentment. If I had returned to my homeland when Sansui first came to me… At the very least, it wouldn't have ended like it did."

If my master had made a different choice five hundred years ago and returned home, perhaps he could have avoided fighting Fukei. It's not that I don't understand my master's regrets in that regard.

"I hear that Ran returned to her homeland to apologize. She may have been rejected by them, but it was still something she needed to do. I need to learn from her example."

Even if the victims don't want him there, he still needs to go see them, to apologize to them. The one making the apologies shouldn't make assumptions about the recipient of those apologies. I suppose there's a logic to that.

"Heh… Sansui, you should worry less about me and more about yourself," my master chides me with a small smile. "You'll be away from this kingdom for the next year. Of course, there's no choice for you, given that you're fulfilling your role, but that means you'll be leaving behind the woman you've gone to the trouble of wooing." He makes a show of laughing. "If you don't go out of your way to beg for her to wait a year for you, when you get back… Well, the possibility is there, isn't it?"

He's telling me to take time to show my affection to Blois. I never thought I'd hear something like that from my master. It comes as a complete shock.

"You should worry less about this geezer without a future and more about the beautiful young woman who might very well leave you."

I think he's teasing me, but he's completely right. When I glance next to me, I see a grinning Lain and a blushing Blois.

"Th-That's right, Sansui! If you're not nice enough to me over the next week, I might go back to my family estate and marry some other man!"

"What? Really?" Lain asks, taking Blois's statement at face value.

"L-Lain… I'm just telling Sansui to pay more attention to me."

“O-Oh, okay! I got it! Papa, if you don’t pay attention to Miss Blois, I’ll go back to my family home too!”

What would Lain’s family home be? The Domino Republic? I feel like we’re getting off topic, but I couldn’t help but wonder about that. No, no. I’m not a child, so I don’t have to reply in kind.

“I-I see… That’d be tragic… All right then, Blois. Let’s spend a good long time together talking tonight.”

“…Y-Yes, of course!”

A couple that’s engaged to be married having a long “talk” at night… Seems Blois gets the hint.

“My, my, Sansui and Blois are finally like a normal couple…” Lady Douve chuckles at our exchange. There’s quite a bit of teasing malice behind her laughter.

Now, it’s time for bed, and Blois and I are lying down together in the dark. I’ve met her parents and I’ve solved my physical limitations, so there’s nothing to stop us. But, as usual, our non-romantic conversation seems to be taking precedence.

“Honestly… I never expected your master to be so funny.”

“Yeah, true…”

I’m not a particularly interesting or funny person. That’s true of Blois, as well, and neither of us have the ability to make others laugh. Lady Douve always considered that a failing when we were serving as her bodyguards. However, my master is not only a superb swordsman, but he can crack a joke, and he’s funny enough to make even Lady Douve laugh.

“And… Honestly, I was happy to see that he was concerned about us.”

“True… It also seemed like my master was really bothered by the fact that he injured me the other day…” A bleeding wound on my forehead had caused quite a panic. Ever since, my master has gone out of his way to make sure he doesn’t hurt me.

“I think my master is…really thankful for many things. He’s happy that I’m doing well here in the Arcana Kingdom, which is why he’s doing so much for everyone.”

He must be well aware that the people who rule the Arcana Kingdom are afraid of him. He’s probably exploring what he can do for them while not frightening them any further.

“I’m sure it’ll cause quite a fuss if my master goes to Tempera Village, but…I still hope it’ll be something that gives him peace.”

“I hope so too…”

Blois takes hold of my hand.

“…”

“…”

I squeeze her hand in return.

“…”

We really are clumsy at times like this. But, fortunately, I already know what I'm supposed to say.

"Blois, I'll be going to Magyan with Lady Douve. Which means... I'll be gone for a year."

"Mmhm."

"I know you'll be lonely, but... Will you wait for me?"

I don't want to think of this conversation as being orchestrated by my master, but it's true that it's still something I need to ask her.

"Don't tell me, show me... Without that...I might fall into another man's arms."

"I see... Well, I can't have that happening."

Even in our own hamfisted way, Blois and I know what we should do next.

The next morning. Saiga and Ran are here to train, but they're accompanied by four people who shouldn't be here at all.

"H-Hello... We're here as messengers from Tempera Village..."

The four martial artists who made up Ran's old entourage—Yabia of the Four Vessels Style, Suji of the Bursting Venom Style, Kazuno of the Drunken Fist Style, and Konoko of the Mist Shadow Style—are all here, looking very nervous and on their very best behavior. I'd heard they were back at Tempera Village training, so why are they here now?

"The other day, the Elder of the Testudo Style foresaw in a dream that you intended to visit the village," the four of them explain the situation to my master, trembling as they do so. They pause before continuing. "We're here to keep you from going. Um... Not to be rude, but we would very much prefer it if you didn't visit the village."

No doubt the prophetic dream had terrified the elder in question, which is probably why he sent the four of them to stop my master. I suppose the elder's already suffered enough, given that he saw that terrifying dream.

"Mrph... All right, I understand."

Even my master evidently didn't expect to be told ahead of time not to go to the village because of a prophetic dream. He can only give a short, affirmative reply to their request.

"I see... They're that opposed to having me there."

My master appears hurt by that sentiment, but he can't bring himself to be angry at the news.

Part 4 — Accompanying

Now, to recap our current situation: Yabia, Suji, Kazuno, and Konoko, who were supposed to be undergoing further training in Tempera Village, are here to make sure that my master doesn't go there.

They're clearly frightened by Master Suiboku. It's probably partly due to the fact that he's my master, and partly from the knowledge that he's the man who got rid of the storm clouds covering the kingdom. No doubt the sheer terror on the Testudo Style elder's face when describing him didn't help matters.

"S-So, what are you four going to do now?" Ran asks the four to change the subject. Unlike last time, they departed the village with an elder's permission. They can probably just go home if they want.

"Ahm… The Elder said we can come back immediately or stay here for a while…"

It seems that they don't have any specific plans for the time being.

"But, really, none of us are strong enough to claim to be fully trained… So we were planning to go back and resume our training…"

"Ran, is there something going on?"

"Yeah, I'm going to Sunae's homeland, so it would have been nice to have you along…"

The four of them are drawn to the words "Sunae's homeland." After all, it's a foreign land far away from the Arcana Kingdom, so of course it would pique their curiosity. At the same time, they're well aware of their own level of ability, or lack thereof.

"Honestly, we'd like to go, but we're little better than carnival acts right now in terms of skill."

"Yeah, we'll end up getting mocked again, just like Eckesachs did."

It appears that all four are thinking back on their recent experiences, and are fully aware that demonstrating unpolished skills will just draw derisive laughter. I understand their feelings, and I think it's the right mindset. Even if they were to train on the journey there, they still wouldn't be worthy of serving in the retinue of a princess.

"Mm…"

However, it seems my master has other ideas.

"So, it's not that you don't wish to go, yes?"

"Well, yes… But the way we are right now…"

"I understand being ashamed of not having enough skill. But, if you wish to go, I'll lend you a hand."

A parcel appears from the air. Or rather, the parcel appears from my master's forest, floating in the air above.

"These are noble treasures designed for you martial artists. I originally intended to give them to the residents of Tempera Village, but now that they've rejected my overtures, there's nothing wrong with you four taking them instead."

As expected, there are noble treasures inside the parcel. Not only that, but they're different from the ones he gave my students. Just how many types of noble treasures can my master make? That also makes me wonder exactly when he actually made them. Do they really take so little time to make?

"I also understand the desire to try to stand a little taller than you actually are. The opportunity to visit a foreign land doesn't come by very often. If you practice on the way, I'm sure you'll be presentable by the time you get there."

My master likes to spoil everyone other than me... Why does he go around handing out easy-to-use and useful items to everyone else, after he forced me to learn his most difficult Ultimate Technique first...? I mean, I'm sure my master had his own reasons for how he taught me, and thinking back on it, I did ask for his tutelage in becoming the strongest. But still...

"Um... Don't those items make it possible for us to use the Immortal Arts like Sansui? Are you sure we should have them?"

"Of course. These little items don't even come close to making up for what I did to your village. I'll teach you how to use them over the next week. The rest is up to you. Do your best."

"Thank you!"

Ran rejoices as she sees just how happy the gifts make her friends, but I can't help but feel a pang of jealousy.

Anyway, that's how we got more people to join our journey... Otherwise, the week until our departure passes quickly.

This journey is a form of diplomacy; it's an opportunity for two unconnected countries, the Arcana Kingdom and the Magyan Kingdom, to establish diplomatic relations.

Since a Magyan prince and princess are going to be marrying into two Arcanian noble families, there's a certain amount of respect we need to pay to their royal family. That is why our caravan is something like a royal procession, with a large number of people helping to keep track of the enormous amount of luggage we're taking to Magyan. Of course, there's also a large group of soldiers escorting the caravan, so it's also kind of like a military campaign in its own way.

His Fathership is serving as the representative of this caravan, largely due to the fact that, while he is retired, he's also still spry enough to work. Additionally, he's Lady Douve's father and a warrior, making him a fitting representative to send to a country like Magyan. Since there's no one of importance from House Batterabbe or the Arcanian royal family on this journey, he's effectively the sole representative of the Arcana Kingdom.

"Very well, then we leave this effort in your hands."

The day of our departure, His Majesty the King of Arcana comes to personally see His Fathership off on his journey. It's a heavy responsibility,

since his actions could very well tarnish the Arcana Kingdom's reputation if his conduct proves to be lacking.

"Please rest assured I will do my best, Your Majesty."

This is just something that I'm not capable of doing anything about. It's all on His Fathership's shoulders.

"I, too, entrust my son-in-law and daughter to your care," says Lord Batterabbe; since he can't accompany the caravan, he has also come to pay his respects.

"Yes, rest easy. They're in good hands."

The caravan includes not just Saiga, Sunae, Ran, and the four from Tempera Village, but also Happine and Zuger. The male-female ratio is really skewed in this party.

"Eckesachs. Since I can't go with you…I'm counting on you to protect them."

"Mm, yes, leave it to me!"

It's weird to see my master talking to Eckesachs, much less making a request of her, since he switches back to how he spoke as a young man. I guess he can't help it, since he traveled with her when he was young.

"Father, rest assured that our lands will be safe in your absence," says His Brothership, in an effort to reassure His Fathership.

"Such an odd thing to say, since they've been in your care for years," His Fathership replies, indicating that such reassurances are unnecessary.

"Heh... I suppose that's true."

"Your Majesty…Lord Batterabbe, Lord Sepaeda. Once again, I wish to offer my thanks for assembling a mission of such scale for our sake. No doubt my father will be happy to recognize the greatness of the Arcana Kingdom, despite the distance between here and my homeland," Tahlan says to express his thanks, and Sunae bows with him without a word.

No doubt this whole thing has cost a good deal of money, and it's also proof that the Arcanians take these two seriously as foreign royals. That is why Tahlan and Sunae are also doing their best to offer their gratitude respectfully to the Arcana Kingdom.

"Good luck over there, you lot."

"Yep... You guys take care of yourselves too."

A short distance away, my students are gathered in two different groups: the group that will accompany Tahlan as Lady Douve's bodyguards, and those that will stay and serve the vassals of House Sepaeda. This will probably be the last time they'll all be gathered in one place. In that sense, this is a memorable and moving occasion.

As I watch the people bidding each other their farewells, the reality sinks in that we're heading out on a long journey, one that'll take much longer than a day, and we won't see the people that are saying goodbye for a very long time.

It stirs an emotion in me that I haven't felt in what feels like forever. A journey that takes a year, a journey to a distant foreign land…in this world, it's an enormous undertaking.

"S-Sansui…"

"Papa…"

As I revel in that emotion, I hear two voices call to me. Blois and Lain are standing there and both of them are looking at me. They're both dressed up for the occasion and both of them look like they're about to cry. That's right. This is the first time we're going to be apart for so long.

"Blois, Lain."

I realize at that moment that, despite my five hundred years of life, a year is a long, long time.

"Will you two wait for me?"

In spite of my awkwardness, I embrace them, hoping and praying that I can get my feelings across to them.

"O-Of course I'll wait…! Y-You better not forget about me on the way there!"

It's only when I hear her words that I realize that, while there's certainly a possibility that Blois might lose interest in me while I'm gone, the opposite is also possible; I might lose interest in Blois during the prolonged absence.

"Don't worry, you'll be on my mind," I say and tighten my embrace, squeezing her harder. "You're about the only one who could ever love me."

"T-True!" Blois stutters.

"Yup!" Lain chimes in.

I was kind of hoping they'd tell me I was wrong, but oh well.

"Blois, that's where you're supposed to say, 'That's not true! You're a handsome man, so I worry.'"

The one who sees into my heart and understands what I was hoping to hear is Lyra, standing a little ways behind Blois and Lain. She's not the only one, of course; Chette and Hetter are here as well. Since there's no reason for Blois and Lain to stay in the royal capital without me or Lady Douve around, they plan to return to the Wynne estate with the three siblings after we set off.

"Lyra, you shouldn't get involved in a couple's affairs."

"True… Seems I'm the one who overstepped for once and forgot my place."

"Oh, c'mon now…"

Hetter tries to chide Lyra for intervening in the affairs of a couple, but Lyra easily counters her brother's comment.

The Wynne siblings are always fun to watch.

"Master Sansui. We'll keep Blois with us at home until you return. Please make sure you return to claim her." Chette is smiling with an expression I never could have imagined on her features when I first met her. Still, there's a certain weightiness to her smile. "And, if possible…"

"Yes?"

“Just between us…could you have your master regularly send me Coiled Peaches?” she asks, putting forward an extremely obnoxious question.

Anyway, that’s how our journey started.

Chapter 2 — The Kingdom of the Strong

Part 5 — The Victor

And so our journey began. Ordinarily, you would think that at this point there'd be some exciting, edge-of-your-seat adventure material, like being attacked by bandits or going through dangerous territory. However, I want you to think more carefully for a moment. We're in a caravan consisting of rows of large horse-drawn carriages and carts. Further, the caravan is protected by fully armed and armored soldiers. No band of bandits could ever hope to defeat that.

There's also the fact that the size of the carriages limits the kinds of roads that we can take, so the caravan sticks to safe, relatively flat roads even if it means that we have a slightly longer trip. Finally, we're starting our journey in the Arcana Kingdom. Given the size and power of that country, their neighbors go out of their way to make sure the caravan encounters no trouble.

Put another way, that means there isn't much to entertain Lady Douve, and there was only one notable incident along the way that was of any interest to her.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Magyan Tahlan."

"Whooo!"

We can't just pass through the countries along the way and just drop off a brusque notice of our passage. The Arcana Kingdom has established diplomatic relations with the neighboring countries, and so we have to stop to pay our respects to the various royals and powerful nobles along the way. I don't have to do much in that regard, but Tahlan himself causes quite a stir at a ball held in our honor.

"A-Ah, Prince Tahlan, where are you from?"

"A kingdom called Magyan, to the south of here."

"My! A southern kingdom! That sounds so lovely!"

Tahlan is such a perfect gentleman that even other men can't find fault with him. He's well-bred, strong, brave, elegant, smart, well-mannered, and respectful to women. In addition to all those internal virtues, he's also handsome, tall, and long-limbed. His skin tone is a bit different when compared to the typical person from these parts and his features are a little different, but that just adds some exotic spice and makes him seem that much more like a foreign prince.

Of course, Saiga and I are also foreigners here, but no one bothers to speak to us or finds anything particularly odd about our foreignness.

"Please come and visit. The Magyan Kingdom is my beloved homeland."

"Th-Then perhaps I can accompany you…"

"I'm afraid I cannot indulge your request, as my fiancée would be quite angry at me if that were to happen… Please forgive me for refusing."

"Oh no…!"

Of course, everyone knows that a noble of the Arcana Kingdom is going to marry a foreign prince. In spite of that, the actual sight of Tahlan makes

these noblewomen forget the fact that he's engaged. It's not just the young women, either. Even the older women who look like they have grown children swoon and weep when they hear from Tahlan that he's engaged to be married.

"...Damn."

Women are gathered all around Tahlan and they're all crying. Saiga lets out a breath of admiration, but he doesn't think there's anything odd about the sight. After all, even men like us look at Tahlan and think of him as the very epitome of a man, the sort of man we know will always draw women to him. I mean, that's why a certain number of my students decided to serve under him, even if it meant working as Lady Douve's bodyguard.

"Hehehe..."

And of course, Lady Douve, the victor, couldn't help but smile at the sight. She's taking a great deal of joy in the fact that she's able to look down upon the weeping women, safe and secure in Tahlan's arms. There aren't any flowery words to describe Lady Douve's current station. She's simply one of the winners in life.

"Hrrrrrmph! What does that woman have that I don't, Prince Tahlan?!"

There are even people who forget that Lady Douve is a daughter of House Sepaeda and loudly voice their complaints as a consequence. There's no reason for Lady Douve to say anything in response; all she has to do is silently receive the love Tahlan directs her way and those around her end up self-destructing. Damn, that's impressive. I guess that's what it really means to be a winner.

"A-Ahm... Prince Tahlan, what are you so drawn to in Lady Douve? Is she... Well, does she know some scandalous secret about you...?"

"Yes, the scandalous secret is that I'm in love with her."

Tahlan is a man's man, landing a tactful riposte even in response to extremely snide comments. Just the fact that he answers with a smile makes the women around him tremble.

"Th-Then, what about that woman draws you to her?"

"In response to questions like that, I like to answer 'everything about her.' But, alas, that often draws her ire, and she chides me that I'm not trying hard enough. She's not a particularly forgiving woman when I upset her, but that is just one more of her charms."

He smiles happily and smoothly explains his reasons. It's clear to everyone listening that he's not just speaking off the cuff, rather he's describing what he sincerely feels in his heart.

"If I'm to name something in particular, it's that she understands me."

The women around him all appear light-headed. They're deliriously happy at the fact they've met the man of their dreams, while also despairing that he's already promised his hand to another. Considering that a man like this is actually in love with her, I can't help but believe that Lady Douve occupies the absolute center of the universe, with everything else merely revolving around her.

"At this rate, someone might try to assassinate Douve..."

Happine, one of the only women here who isn't swooning over Tahlan, makes a prediction as she watches the women around Tahlan. It's a dry observation, and definitely not something born out of any concern for Lady Douve.

"She's amazing... I wouldn't be able to bear that..."

Meanwhile, Zuger is cowering from the hateful and envious gazes the women direct at Lady Douve, even though she herself isn't on the receiving end. It reminds me of the envious glares Chette directed my way. I remember being really freaked out at the time, but that was just from one woman. Lady Douve is being glared at by at least a dozen women. Just how is she able to withstand all of that?

“Just to warn you, this will get worse the closer we get to my homeland. It could very well end up as a literal bloodbath.”

Sunae, like Lady Douve, looks on proudly at the throng of women surrounding her brother. While she’s clearly pleased at how popular her brother is, the rest of us can’t help but experience a shudder of dread at her observation.

Anyway, as noted, Tahlan and Lady Douve caused a stir at every place we stopped at along the way. It’s understandable, of course. People hear the rumors that a handsome foreign prince is going to marry a noblewoman and, driven by curiosity, they come to get a glimpse of him.

Then they come face to face with the reality that is Magyan Tahlan. Just the sight of him causes an enormous stir. No one seemed to care an iota about Sunae and Saiga’s engagement. It’s not that Saiga and Sunae are lacking in any way; Tahlan is just that extraordinary.

Soon enough, we’ve left the areas that have any interaction with the Arcana Kingdom and are approaching the areas that have relationships with the Magyan Kingdom. After several months of travel by carriage, the cityscapes and climate have changed noticeably, and we’re starting to see people dressed like Sunae and Tahlan.

Having passed through many countries, we’re finally at a country that shares a border with the Magyan Kingdom and where the locals know Tahlan personally.

“Ah... The Donzila Kingdom. Our homeland is close.”

“Yes. Lovely to be here again, brother.”

The prince of neighboring Magyan has now returned to this region, carrying a great deal of treasure in tow. Since Tahlan is passing through Donzila, the king sends a messenger asking the Magyan prince to pay him a visit. As we have no viable reason to reject that request, we’re now on the way to the Donzilan capital.

Just the rumor that Tahlan is somewhere in the row of carriages heading for the capital gathers a crowd that brings a victory parade to mind. That it’s this bad in a neighboring country means I don’t even want to imagine how popular Tahlan is back in Magyan itself.

“Wow, listen to those cheers... And they’re almost all coming from women. It’s like he’s a pop star or something,” Saiga says, taken completely aback.

Rather, Saiga is just being overwhelmed by the sheer intensity of the looks directed this way. Almost all of the main players are currently in the largest carriage, and quite a few of the group are cowed by the sheer intensity of the reception. Zuger’s definitely trembling in fear. Well, yeah, this is probably particularly hard for her to bear.

“Hehehe... Sansui, all of these cheers are calling out for Tahlan, yes?”

“Yes. All of the voices are full of admiration for Prince Tahlan.”

“I see… So I get to have such an amazing man all to myself…”

The only thing Lady Douve is feeling at the moment is a sense of superiority to the women around her. She really must have nerves of steel. Perhaps you need to be this implacable when marrying a royal.

“Hehehe, no matter how much the common people scream, this man is mine…”

At this point I can only admire her personality. She’s pretty much the epitome of a haughty noblewoman.

“Um, brother… Are you sure she’s the right one?”

“Of course. I like that she’s like this. Besides, when I’m in the Arcana Kingdom, people looked upon me with envy as the foreigner that had been welcomed into House Sepaeda. I never said it aloud, but I felt a smug satisfaction in that. It means that we’re birds of a feather.” Tahlan makes no sign of being disappointed by Lady Douve’s behavior as he reassures his younger sister.

“Sansui, you look a bit pale. Did you sense something?”

“Well…”

A sharp observation by a cheerful Lady Douve. Yes, I feel awful right now. I feel an aggressive hostility from the palace we’re approaching. The spite of a woman scorned, perhaps.

“There’s an aura of broken hearts coming from Donzila’s royal palace… I believe there are quite a few women there who have become depressed at learning of Tahlan’s engagement…”

Lady Douve is pleased by that report, just as I feared, even though she’s also realized the extent of the utter hatred directed at her, which I tactfully didn’t mention aloud.

“There were many princesses in neighboring kingdoms who had their eyes on my brother. Of course, quite a few of those were just playing around and weren’t seriously in love with him… But some of the princesses of Donzila were sincerely smitten with my brother.”

“Fate had other ideas. That’s all there is to it. Besides, even in this country, those without the Royal Presence can’t marry into the royal family. Either way, it’s a love that was fated to remain unrequited. Just as I was blessed by fate, I’m sure they, in turn, will meet their true loves,” Tahlan says with an acceptance of his own fate, a palpable sense that there simply isn’t anything he could have done. The fact that he’s able to properly turn down women approaching him so calmly is another reason why he’s the very model of a gentleman.

The Donzila Kingdom is a country that’s like a cross between India and the Middle East, and the palace is built in that same style. Of course, neither Saiga nor I know all that much about India or the Middle East, and in my case, what I do remember is really vague, only just in the corner of my mind.

After all, it’s knowledge that I possessed five hundred years ago, so the details have long since faded away. It’s just a vague sense that this is what those places were like. Even if I did remember those things clearly, since they don’t actually have anything to do with the real Donzila Kingdom, they wouldn’t have any meaning.

Since it’s my first time in this country, I may as well not pretend that I know anything about similar countries and act like the gawking bumpkin that I actually am.

“Thank you for stopping in our kingdom, Prince Tahlan.”

“I offer my thanks for allowing us to pass through your kingdom, O great King of Donzila.”

“Don’t be so formal. Our two kingdoms have long been close, and you yourself often visited here as a child. Our friendship hasn’t changed in all those years.”

The Donzilan royal palace, perhaps designed with Spirit Summoning in mind, is extremely large with really high ceilings. At the same time, it’s only a single-story building, so while it is elaborate, a part of me can’t help but feel it’s also a little simple in its construction. The throne isn’t a chair, but rather a set of cushions arrayed on a dais constructed of thick planks.

The king is sitting cross-legged atop the pile of cushions. He’s a little portly because of his age, but he has a well-muscled body beneath those layers of fat. While he’s obviously past his prime, he’s still probably strong enough to easily defeat someone like Sunae.

“And to the delegation from the distant kingdom called Arcana, welcome. Our kingdom is not so savage that we forget our manners when facing people from a country we’ve never heard of.”

“I thank you for your kind words, Your Majesty. When we return to our homeland, we’ll speak of your hospitality and generosity.”

As representative of the delegation, His Fathership is the one who pays his respects to the king, and the king of Donzila seems pleased with the elder warrior. His Fathership may not be the strongest, but he’s a soldier who’s seen his share of battles. It seems that the king has easily perceived that from how he carries himself. Strong men treat other strong men with respect; that seems to be the common understanding in this region.

As for me and Saiga, no one really is paying much attention to us. I suppose that’s unavoidable, since neither of us actually appear that strong.

“Now, Prince Tahlan, are the rumors true that you’re going to marry a noblewoman of a foreign land, and that you’re returning to your homeland to pay your respects?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I am promised to marry this lovely rose, the honorable Lady Douve Sepaeda. I’ve thrown aside my shame and returned so that I may have permission to marry her.”

“I see... Then once your marriage is approved, will you return to your duties as a prince in your homeland?”

“No, Your Majesty. If I am allowed, I intend to live out my days in the Arcana Kingdom.”

The king of Donzila seems extremely troubled by this revelation. It’s not showing in his expression, but he’s having trouble finding the words to continue.

I can hear the sound of sobbing women from several rooms in the palace. It’s not something I’m hearing with my senses as an Immortal, either; the crying is loud enough for even a mortal to hear. Lady Douve’s doing her best to hold back her laughter, even if she isn’t able to conceal her smugness. I doubt she’ll do anything tactless, but her smile has a malicious glee behind it.

The world really is an odd place. I mean, the fact that there’s a man who likes this in a woman is odd, but what’s even odder is that the man in question is as perfect as a man has any right to be.

“I see. A pity, we’ll miss your presence.”

“Yes, which is why I intend to do right by my parents while I’m here. After all, my father has allowed me to do as I pleased. I want to make sure everything is settled between us before I depart again…”

Although Tahlan is aware of the sobbing, unlike, say, a particularly oblivious protagonist might not be, he ignores the sobs to push the conversation forward. There’s not really anything he can say about the situation that wouldn’t cause him additional headaches, and it would be disrespectful to worry about the women who aren’t even in the room while he’s speaking to the king himself.

“Yes… Then, while it’s a pity, I suggest you hurry back to your homeland.”

“Is something afoot in my homeland?”

“This is merely a rumor and not official news…but the word is that the king of Magyan has taken ill and is confined to his bed.”

“Truly?!”

“Even the strongest man can’t defeat age or illness. You should take the day to rest here, but I urge you to return home as soon as possible.”

I’m sure this news is true. Given that he’s not an Immortal, the king’s certainly vulnerable to disease. If he’s been suffering from it for a while, it must be a serious illness. Fortunately, we have Coiled Peaches and Divine Ginseng as part of the dowry. Eating those can cure most illnesses. I mean, I’d rather not recommend a fruit that can kill people if consumed in excess, so I’d rather we keep it as a last resort, but still, it’s nice to have the option.

“Father is ill…”

“He still seemed so young…”

“Illness doesn’t care about one’s age. There’s little to do about that.”

We’re spending the night in a guest room in the Donzilan royal palace. Sunae and Tahlan are busy fretting after hearing the rumors that their

father is sick. Depending on how bad the illness is, it could very well mean he's dying, so I understand why they're so worried.

"Tahlan, should Sansui or I hurry ahead and take him a Coiled Peach?"

"Brother, even if my father is sick, he wouldn't take something that was offered to him by a complete stranger," Tahlan replies, answering Saiga's question in good faith.

Thinking about it rationally, there's no way that someone would just eat a fruit proclaimed to be a cure-all if it was offered by a man who had just suddenly appeared before them. It might be different if it was someone who couldn't see a doctor, but there's no way the king would accept it.

"Then maybe just Sunae or Tahlan could return first..."

"That has its own problems. As you know, we're returning to our homeland with a large entourage in tow. I doubt Magyan will let the delegation in without both me and Sunae present. Besides, regardless of whether it's Sunae or myself, if a royal who had left the kingdom were to suddenly return to the palace, it's going to raise questions among the people."

If it were possible, Tahlan would like nothing more than to head out now. However, whatever he might be feeling, he's rejected that option after a careful analysis of the situation. Sunae wordlessly backs her brother's judgment. For the moment, it's just a rumor that they've heard from a neighboring king. They can't afford to throw their own kingdom into chaos based on mere gossip.

"It might sound heartless, but if Sunae or I move recklessly, it'll cause confusion in the kingdom. If that happens, many people will die. Both Sunae and I care deeply about our father. With that said, if our presence causes unrest, many men and women will be injured or killed. Because we're still outside of our homeland, we can't afford to do anything that'll cause further unease."

"That's right, son of Batterabbe. First of all, this is still just a rumor. Of course, if this were regarding a pending invasion, it would be an emergency, but it would be dangerous to stir up a country simply because a single man, even one as powerful as the king, is ill."

His Fathership is as ruthlessly pragmatic as usual. Still, Tahlan nods quietly in agreement with his statement. His Fathership's words are ruthless, but they also convey truth. There's no guarantee that the information is accurate, and even if the rumors are true, it's not enough of a reason to take dramatic action.

"Even if my father passes away because we don't move now, it wouldn't be your fault. If there's anywhere to place the blame, it's on the fact that our homeland's medicine isn't up to the task."

While it's easy for us to forget, the Mystic Arts used for healing magic are a Rare Art with a small number of practitioners. The reason that Art is so common in the Arcana Kingdom is because they have a bloodline that can

produce Mystics in House Caputo. Because of that, the Arcana Kingdom has one of the highest standards of medical care in this world.

True, my master's Coiled Peaches and Divine Ginseng make it easy to take Mysticism for granted, but the Arcana Kingdom is still far ahead of its peers when it comes to medical care.

"Besides…aren't Coiled Peaches and Divine Ginseng poisonous when consumed in excess? Eckesachs, I'd like to know more about that point. Even if our father is ill, do you know which one we should give him?"

"It depends on the type of illness, but the easiest way is to give him those things in small doses. If you slice the Coiled Peach into pieces and give him one at a time, it's easy to take additional measures regardless of whether his condition improves or worsens. If he gets worse when consuming the Coiled Peach, then you can just give him small doses of the Divine Ginseng. That would solve that problem."

It sounds like the proposal of an amateur, but that's completely understandable, given that we are, in effect, amateurs when it comes to their use. Thinking back on it, I probably should have asked my master about the proper way of administering these things.

"Mm."

In the middle of our discussion, I feel auras gathering outside the room. I feel an intense shade of aggression, auras of people who are ready to kill. Yet, on the other hand, it didn't seem like they were here to barge in and start a fight.

"Pardon us."

After a knock, a woman with several other women in her retinue enters the room. It goes without saying that she's got the same skin tone as Sunae and Tahlan, and she's beautiful, yet extremely well-toned. She and the women with her all have the Royal Presence. There's no doubt that she's a princess of this kingdom and her companions are her close retainers.

"It's been a long time, Prince Tahlan."

"Ahh, Princess Gayaou. It has indeed been a long time."

As expected, it seems she and Tahlan are acquainted, judging by how Tahlan greets her. We're guests in this castle, so of course we're going to be respectful to our hosts.

"Tahlan, could you introduce me to this beautiful and powerful woman," His Fathership interjects, carefully choosing his compliment. In this region, strength is a virtue for women as well. If he was to describe her as cute or some other word that connotes weakness, no doubt it would offend her.

"Yes, Father. This is Donzila Gayaou, a princess of this kingdom. Princess Gayaou, this is the man who is to become my father-in-law."

The woman in turn gives His Fathership an appraising look. While he's declined somewhat with age, it's still easy to see, even through his garb, that he's a man who put in a great deal of training in his time.

"A pleasure to meet you, noble gentleman from a distant land. No doubt your long journey was taxing. Please take time to rest here in Donzila."

“You honor me. Unfortunately, I’m getting too old for a journey of this length,” His Fathership says modestly, but it’s not entirely for show. I’m sure he’s tired from the long journey. “I look fondly back on my days on the battlefield. I’m afraid time comes for us all, and now I’m reduced to traveling with long rests between each day’s journey.”

“Oh, how you jest. I can see you’re still spry enough to wield a sword.”

Seems this woman, Gayaou, respects His Fathership enough to exchange pleasantries with him. In sharp contrast, she clearly views Lady Douve with naked hostility.

“Tahlan, would you mind introducing me to the woman who is to be your wife?”

Her words are surprisingly aggressive. Essentially, she’s doing the “Huh! You’re Tahlan’s fiancée?! I’m sorry, I didn’t notice you” routine. I feel a dull ache in the pit of my stomach as the verbal sparring commences.

“My, my, Tahlan... You’re not marrying my father, so you should have introduced me first.”

Lady Douve is giving as good as she’s getting. The clear undertone in her statement is, “See, I’m marrying Tahlan. Aren’t you envious?” Gayaou, of course, can read between the lines and her brow twitches. We can’t help but tense our expressions as well. I mean, Zuger’s on the verge of tears.

“Apologies, Douve. It’s not that I’m taking you for granted.”

While Tahlan is caught between Lady Douve and Gayaou, he’s still maintaining his calm. His complete nonchalance makes him seem almost saintly.

“Princess Gayaou, this is the Lady Douve Sepaeda, my soul mate.”

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Princess Gayaou.”

Sparks fly as they exchange verbal blows. The room suddenly feels like a battlefield, and we can all feel the tension in the air.

“Say, Tahlan, can you tell me your relationship with Her Highness?”

“Ah, are you asking if we once had a close relationship?”

“Not at all. I just want to learn more about your past.”

Lady Douve is implying that the other woman doesn’t even compare to her, and Gayaou can’t hide her irritation at Lady Douve’s barb.

“Donzila and Magyan have a long-standing relationship. So we often visited one another’s kingdoms as members of various diplomatic missions.”

“Ah, I see. I never really thought about it when we were in Arcana, but I suppose there was a time when you had to fulfill your duties as a prince, mm?”

It’s an extremely aggressive posture for Lady Douve to take. She’s basically saying, “Oh, so you didn’t have a personal relationship, you just talked at parties?”

“Tahlan! May I borrow you for a minute? I’d like to speak to you alone!”

It’s at this point that Princess Gayaou takes an aggressive verbal step forward. Well, more than aggressive; it’s bordering on the dangerous. Her

rough tone of voice and the reaction of her ladies-in-waiting suggest she's very close to losing her composure.

"A complicated request. Please, may I have a moment?"

"I…"

She's closed the distance with Tahlan and is causing him some distress. It's pretty reckless on her part, but it seems she has no intention of withdrawing.

"If you don't want to be alone with me, you can bring your sister as well. It's important, so please."

Tahlan hesitates and glances over to Lady Douve.

"My, my, Tahlan, could it be you're afraid of my reaction?" Lady Douve says, smiling maliciously. "It's all right, Tahlan. Take Miss Sunae with you and go have your chat. It doesn't bother me at all."

Her expression shows that her ultimate victory isn't even in doubt.

"I'm afraid I can't go with you, Your Highness. She's testing me," Tahlan replies, rejecting Gayaou's invitation out of hand. "If I were to accompany you, no doubt she'll needle me with that fact long into the future. Even ten years from now, she'll be pointing out that I went to speak privately with another woman when we went to report our marriage to my family. I'd like to avoid that at all costs. You're welcome to mock me as a weak man."

In this understated fashion, Tahlan is conveying to Princess Gayaou that he intends to constantly be at Lady Douve's side from now on.

"As the one marrying into her family, I can't behave as a prince to her."

He clearly states that he's no longer a prince of Magyan, but merely the son-in-law of a distant land's noble house. It's an impressively manly display of resignation.

"Then I'll tell you here. Either way, you can't stay uninvolved."

I wonder what she'll do now. Will she direct her envy and hatred at Lady Douve for securing the perfect man, like the noblewomen we'd run into on the way here? Will she despair at the fact that a man she'd been in love with for a long time has been caught in the web of an evil temptress? That's what I was thinking, but it seems that's not what's on her mind at the moment.

"I'm sure even the people from the distant Arcana Kingdom are aware that royals without the Royal Presence have no claim to the throne in countries in this region, yes?"

"Yes, I've heard that from the siblings," His Fathership answers as our representative. It's true that everyone here is already aware of this.

"As he has the Shadow Presence, Prince Tahlan, despite being the eldest son of the current king, has no claim to the throne."

Yes, she's just confirming what we know. Why is she bothering to go over all this again?

"As people who swear fealty to a king who doesn't have the Royal Presence, what do you think of this practice?"

His Fathership can't help but loft his brows. He's read the context lurking beneath her statement and is shocked at that realization. Of course,

even Saiga would understand what's being asked at this point. She's talking about overturning the traditions of kingship in this region.

"Mm… I have yet to meet the king of Magyan, so I cannot speak directly about his kingdom, but your kingdom has the same custom and appears to be extremely prosperous. If Magyan is anything like this kingdom, I see no problem with the practice."

Impressively, His Fathership responds with a statement that's hard for Gayaou to dispute. After all, he's essentially saying "You have a nice kingdom, and I'm sure Magyan, which has the same system of government, is also a nice place." Gayaou would be rejecting her own kingdom's government if she was to dispute his statement.

Of course, Princess Gayaou isn't one to back down with a single riposte. While respecting His Fathership's observation, she goes back on the offensive.

"The reason our country prospers is due to the wisdom of my father. You honor me with your observation. However…not everyone with the Royal Presence is suited to rule."

This is something that's hard to dispute. It's not like the innate power one is born with has any influence on one's personality. About the only exception, the one that proves the rule, is Ran, whose aggression comes from being born with an immense amount of Tainted Blood. None of us can say for certain that a powerful individual with the Royal Presence necessarily has the temperament to be king.

"The reverse is also true, is it not? Are there not kings like His Majesty the King of Arcana who governs well despite not having the Royal Presence?" Gayaou fires back, applying the same logic to His Fathership.

It wouldn't be good for His Fathership to say that the king of Arcana is a bad king because he doesn't have the Royal Presence. This whole conversation feels like we're treading on dangerous ground. Just how will His Fathership respond?

"Father, please, this is enough," Tahlan says, cutting His Fathership off with a clear expression of displeasure. "Your Highness, why do you ask such questions of the noble gentleman from a distant land? When did you become one to test another with a silvered tongue?"

His anger is perfectly understandable. It's beyond rude to ask such dangerous questions of someone you've invited as a guest. Since the guests can't just flee from the princess, cornering them with such questions is dishonorable.

"True… Then let me be blunt. I believe Tahlan should be the next king of Magyan."

As expected. It's the only conclusion I could have drawn based on the conversation up to this point. Tahlan has never had any claim to the throne because of Magyan's succession practices, but it seems she has an objection to the practice itself.

“Y-Your Highness! This is interfering in our internal affairs… A proposal that’s the equivalent of invasion! Please, withdraw your statement!” Sunae hurriedly interjects. True, complaining about how another country chooses its king and telling them to change it is tantamount to invasion.

“Princess Sunae… Then do you believe Tahlan is unsuited for the throne?”

“Of course I do,” Sunae answers seriously, even as she understands that her statement can be taken as an insult to Tahlan’s honor. “My brother isn’t worthy of the throne.”

“You, who share a mother with Tahlan, would say such a thing?!”

There are several layers to Princess Gayaou’s anger. First, she’s asking the question because she had been expecting agreement. It’s understandable that she’s upset at hearing an answer she didn’t want. Secondly, she’s also angry at the fact that the man that she loves, Tahlan, is being dismissed as unworthy of the throne.

No, it’s not just her. Several of her retainers are also enraged.

“There are some things only siblings who share the same mother can say. It’s unbecoming for you to be angry simply because I disagree with you. You know full well it’s a serious matter for two who have the Royal Presence to bare their fangs against one another,” Tahlan says calmly, even faced with the simmering rage in the women around him.

He truly has a dignified air to him. Ironically, it’s that very demeanor, the presence of mind that makes it easy for him to dismiss his own claim to the throne, that makes him seem worthy of the throne.

Seeing how he acts, the women ratchet back their anger, even as his behavior strengthens their conviction that Sunae is wrong.

“Prince Tahlan. I hear that your mother was deeply saddened that you were born without the Royal Presence. And as people watched you grow, many people empathized with her sadness. That’s true not only of the Magyan Kingdom, but of the surrounding countries.”

I couldn’t help but feel the same. No doubt if Tahlan had the Royal Presence, he would have made a great king. Even looking at how he’s acting now, there’s nothing about him that makes me rethink that view.

“But I don’t have the Royal Presence. That should be the end of it.”

“Even if you can’t obtain the Royal Presence, the laws can be changed.”

“Should we consider that the official view of the Donzila Kingdom?”

“No, it’s your mother’s view.”

She drops an unexpected person into the conversation. No, perhaps the most natural person to come up in this conversation. It’s also the person I really didn’t want coming up in this conversation.

“Your mother wishes to make you king. We’re simply in agreement with her.”

“So mother put you up to this.”

“She hasn’t put me up to anything. It’s something I’ve felt for a long time, and it’s not just me. There are many people in the neighboring

kingdoms who feel the same way. And, of course, there are others in the Magyan royal family who agree with your mother."

Just how surprised is Tahlan at this revelation? His expression is frozen in shock. He probably could have never imagined that his own mother would try to twist the laws, making common cause with princesses of the neighboring kingdoms, all to make him king.

"This is madness. No matter how you justify it, in the end it boils down to multiple neighboring kingdoms trying to upend Magyan's laws of succession."

"We're simply supporters of the idea. If the people of Magyan want it, the laws can change."

The sad irony is that if Tahlan was a man who would ever show his true colors here out of naked ambition, they might very well grow disillusioned with him and discard the plan. But even here, Tahlan steadfastly clings to what he believes is right.

"Even if I were to become king without being able to use Spirit Summoning, the end result will simply be that a Spirit Summoner who disagrees with my coronation will kill me. No matter how the laws are changed, in the end, it's raw strength that can keep the dissenters in line."

"As for strength...!" Gayaou declares confidently. "As for strength, you have us! We'll be your strength!"

"A man who depends on the strength of neighboring princesses would only draw derisive laughter."

Tahlan really looks disconsolate. Even if he is the very epitome of the ideal prince to these women, he has his own idea of what kingship should be. Tahlan himself is aware that he's far from that ideal.

"If you govern well and bring prosperity to your people, then history will judge that your decision was justified. There's no need for you to listen to those without the imagination to think beyond traditions!"

She's still trying to persuade Tahlan. Even as she does so, she directs her hostility toward us. She makes no effort to hide her anger, even as she stays within the bounds of proper behavior.

"People of Arcana. I truly am grateful that you've brought such treasures to pay your respects to the Magyan Kingdom. We also appreciate the fact that you've brought Prince Tahlan safely back to Magyan."

The women behind Gayaou have also directed their hostility our way. In sharp contrast to her words, Gayaou's attitude essentially tells us to leave Tahlan to them and depart.

"But if you truly wish for Prince Tahlan's happiness...then you should think carefully about what you should do."

This is pretty much an outright declaration of war. It wouldn't surprise me at all if they were to attack us here and now.

"Hehehe..."

Even under these circumstances, Lady Douve chuckles to herself.

“Tahlan, you really do have entertaining friends. After all, they seem to think that it’s natural to be given things of value. They think more like uppity usurpers than proper royals.”

She happily throws more fuel onto the fire. Lady Douve is throwing all of her pent-up malice at the angry women. Just watching her go on attack is nerve-racking.

“It seems they love you so much that they can’t bear to look directly at you. You’re such a heartbreaker,” she says arrogantly, not even bothering to sugarcoat her barbs.

“Damn you!”

“Oh? You’re going to vent your spleen at me, Your Highness? You’ve been going on endlessly about countries and laws, but you’re going to direct your anger at me, who has nothing to do with any of those things?”

Lady Douve is someone who can get to the heart of any matter. It’s true that, in spite of all the justifications she offered, in the end what Princess Gayaou actually wants is to marry Tahlan. Everything else is just an excuse.

“You tell me to think of Tahlan’s happiness, but no matter how you think about it, it’s pretty clear what’s best for him, yes?” Lady Douve says, draping herself against Tahlan, continuing to show off her happiness as a woman.

For some reason, Tahlan reacts to her actions with visible relief. I really don’t understand what’s going on in his head, but it seems he’s relieved that Lady Douve is acting like a villainess. It’s not just me. Princess Gayaou, her retainers, Sunae, even Saiga...they all stare at him in shock.

“Douve…”

“Tsk, you really are...such a heartbreaker.”

It seems like Tahlan is completely under Lady Douve’s sway and enjoying it. I guess this is something that passes between adults, something that I, a mere Immortal, can’t understand. All I know is that Tahlan seems really happy right now. If one truly cares about Tahlan’s happiness, then it’s clear he should stay at Lady Douve’s side. Lady Douve doesn’t see the need to say anything else, letting his reactions tell the whole story.

“Grr… Ahem!”

His Fathership clears his throat to remind the room he’s still here, a look of displeasure on his face. He can’t very well offer negative commentary on Tahlan and Lady Douve’s marriage, given he’s here to pay respects and report on their engagement. So, instead, he redirects his harsh gaze at Princess Gayaou.

“It seems that there are various interests at play here. Allow me to offer a comment.”

He looks at Gayaou with an expression close to contempt.

“It’s completely lacking in dignity or class to openly discuss matters of succession with a prince who has just learned that the current king is not well. It’s perhaps best that you avoid saying anything that implies you’re pleased by that illness.”

He uses reason to tear apart her misplaced passion. It’s true that, up until a few moments ago, Tahlan was struggling to cope with the news of his father’s illness. No doubt it hurt him to hear talk about succession under those circumstances.

“My apologies.”

The most Princess Gayaou is able to do is utter those words and back down. Having realized her mistake, she quickly leaves the room with her retainers in tow. I can’t say it aloud, but she’s basically fleeing with her tail between her legs.

“He really is a man who makes women go mad, isn’t he?” Happine says with astonishment, prompting Zuger to nod in agreement.

A prince who can make a foreign princess obsess this much over him is truly a man who can drive even the sanest woman mad. It’s also clear to me that Tahlan doesn’t want to be that man.

“Brother... It seems...”

“Yes, I know.”

We came on this journey for Tahlan and Sunae to report their engagement to their parents. No doubt they thought it would cause a stir of some sort. However, I doubt they thought it’d end up being something this serious.

“I’ll stop Mother... Both as her son and as a prince...!”

Part 6 — Process

Gayaou, the princess of Donzila, leaves the room, her eyes downcast in disappointment. She's struggling to cope with the weight of her failure, but she has left even more misery in her wake. The room is filled with a gloomy air of sadness as she leaves.

"Mother… How could you?"

To put it plainly, we'd chosen the worst possible moment to travel here. Tahlan, who had disappeared to who knew where, has triumphantly returned to this region just as his father, the king of Magyan, has taken ill.

It's understandable that the people who wanted to make him king, like his mother, have taken that illness as a sign from the heavens. Of course, the truth is that it's simply a coincidence born of bad timing. At the very least, Tahlan himself has no intention of taking the throne.

"Hrmph. We should have just beat that woman down," says Ran, who up until this point hadn't said a word in the conversation, after Gayaou and her retinue leave.

I don't like Ran much, but I understand her sentiment. Princess Gayaou had been extremely rude and expressed no interest in Tahlan's feelings.

"That's not an option. We're guests in this palace. If we fought with her, we'd cause problems for Magyan."

"If they're going to be offended by that, then this whole 'rule through strength' thing is nothing more than a farce."

"You're right. I can't dispute that…" Sunae concedes. She possesses the Royal Presence herself, but can do little more than admit to the truth of Ran's critique.

"It's laughable, even in their ignorance, to tell the people here that they'll be enough to serve as Tahlan's 'strength.'"

"Yes, indeed. It's a sign of ignorance to regard those who can't use Spirit Summoning as weak."

Sunae also accepts Ran's follow-up complaint. The fact that she's not arguing is probably a sign of just how much she's been hurt by her mother's recklessness.

"This, too, is a product of my own actions. I'm truly sorry."

"Oh, there's no need for you to apologize. Isn't that right, Sansui?"

In sharp contrast to Tahlan's apologetic tone, Lady Douve seems rather amused.

"After all, His Lordship, the heir to House Batterabbe, still has to demonstrate his strength to secure the princess's hand in marriage, yes…? Why don't we teach these uppity ladies some manners? In public, of course, as they desire."

Yeah, that'll probably end up being the case. If they're going to claim that they can protect Tahlan, the princesses of the surrounding countries need to prove their strength to the people of Magyan. We, the Arcanians

here to take Tahlan and Sunae into our ranks, also have to prove ourselves worthy of them to the people of Magyan.

Further, as Princess Gayaou pointed out, the Arcana Kingdom—with its interest in having Tahlan marry into House Sepaeda—and the princesses—who want to put Tahlan on the Magyan throne—have completely conflicting goals. Even if this scenario doesn't escalate all the way to the chaos of war, we still can't avoid fighting them.

"I'm truly sorry."

Tahlan's wishes don't matter at all in this discussion. Gayaou made clear that she intends to put him forward as king, even after seeing his expression. She doesn't have any concern for what he actually wants. Therefore, for Tahlan's sake, we can't afford to lose.

"Worry not, my son," His Fathership, irritation and anger clear on his face, gently reassures Tahlan. "If anything, it's a perfect opportunity. After all, we don't get many opportunities to humiliate royals in front of the people."

There's no trace of mercy in His Fathership's expression; he has no intention of sparing the pride of the princesses. His Fathership has never held back, even against his own country's king, so it's pretty easy to understand how he's in no mood to go easy on an opponent who's shown such utter disrespect to him and his people.

"Saiga... You'll probably have to fight as well. I trust that you'll do your best."

"Yep, leave it to me. I'll definitely win."

Saiga has also been motivated by Sunae's request. Tahlan is like a big brother to Saiga, after all, so insulting and hurting him is plenty of reason for him to fight.

"If you're going to have a contest, you can't just have two participants. Sunae, I'll take part too."

Ran has always been violent and eager to fight; this time, though, she's driven by a desire to fight for Sunae and Tahlan's sake.

"Ran, you'll be fighting Spirit Summoners, and they're probably several levels stronger than I am. Are you sure you can win?"

"Relax, Sunae. I've already accepted that you beat me, but I don't intend to lose the same way a second time."

Among Spirit Summoners, Sunae's perhaps about average in terms of skill, but Ran still couldn't beat her when they fought. That's just how tough Spirit Summoners are for a Marked. Since these opponents use the same Art, it'll be hard for Ran to win with just a few extra tactics.

"I've got a reason to be confident. Master Suiboku taught me some fighting techniques."

Still, my master has given Ran some instruction. He only taught her directly for about a week, but given her innate talent for fighting, she easily mastered what he sought to teach her. I'm sure that's part of the effect of having Tainted Blood, but I'm still a little envious.

Of course, there's no guarantee that she can restrain herself sufficiently in the excitement of battle to actually make use of those skills. She's been practicing constantly throughout our journey, so she might be able to keep hold of herself during a sparring match. If things were to go wrong, of course, it'd still be up to Saiga or me to stop her.

"Besides, these four can help too. They're a lot better than they used to be, and they've gotten pretty good at using the noble treasures that Master Suiboku gave them. I'm sure they can overwhelm an opponent who's never seen them fight."

The four fighters from Tempera Village nod in agreement with Ran. They were a last minute addition to the delegation, but they've vastly expanded their tactical options thanks to my master's noble treasures. If they can combine their martial arts techniques with the abilities granted by the noble treasures, I'm sure they can keep up even with Spirit Summoners.

"It's too bad you weren't given any noble treasures when you left the forest."

It's at that moment that Lady Douve decides to land a painful barb right in my heart. That's something I've been thinking about for a long time now, so I wish she hadn't brought it up.

"You've also learned new techniques from your master, yes? Please don't just do your usual dull routine of beating them up with your wooden sword."

"Very well, Lady Douve…"

It's the usual complaint, but she's still worried that my fighting won't have enough of a flourish behind it. I do have some new techniques that my master taught me, so I should be able to satisfy her expectations.

"Thank you… All of you," Tahlan says with a look of relief. He seems happy that everyone is taking his side and wants to help him. "With the help of such powerful warriors, it very much is like having an army at my back. It'll definitely allow us to put an end to my mother's twisted ambition!"

His smile looks like that of a man without any remaining concerns, but he still seems to have reservations. I can sense that coming from him, but I don't comment on it. It'd be cruel to deny him his attempt to put on a brave face.

It goes without saying, but the guest quarters for visiting dignitaries in the Donzila palace aren't just small rooms. It's more accurate to say there's an entire separate manor for guests within the palace itself, with a large common room for socializing, enough bedrooms for each person to have their own, and other rooms scattered around.

Anyway, the important thing is that the common room is a perfect space for a private conversation when everyone else is in bed. Tahlan, Saiga, and I are here to have a quiet chat.

"First…I want to express my gratitude. Of course, I have nothing but thanks for Sansui, my teacher, but I'm also grateful for having you as

someone to train with, Saiga… Truly, I’m grateful for both of you.” Sitting on the luxurious cushions, Tahlan turns to the two of us and bows his head.“While I hate to trouble you further, it seems that the situation in my homeland is in flux. As such, I’d like to make things simpler among ourselves.”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

“It’s not my place to say this, but it’s long past time that you and Sunae came to an understanding.”

We’re touching on extremely personal subjects tonight; at the same time, this is a conversation we should have had before we set out on this journey.

“I’m certain your letter states that Sunae will be marrying into House Batterabbe. But you yourself haven’t actually discussed the matter with Sunae or Happine, have you?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Then I want you to deal with that. I know it’s crass for me to stick my nose into your affairs, but this is your responsibility. As a man, not as the heir to a noble house.”

“Yes…”

“Making Sunae cry might not be avoidable, but don’t make her unhappy. If you do, then I’ll have to raise my sword to you as her brother, even if I can’t win.”

Another of Tahlan’s virtues is that he’s willing to state the facts without sugarcoating them. He really has a way of being able to read the situation and then take the right approach, something I sure couldn’t emulate even if I tried. Even as he’s chastising Saiga, he also seems to be cursing his own lack of power.

“I’m not someone who can lecture anyone on this subject. However, the reason I’m speaking to you about this is because I want to settle our issues before we enter Magyan. I’m sure you have your own thoughts on the matter, but the situation doesn’t give us much choice.”

“No… I… No, I don’t have anything planned…”

Speaking confidentially, Saiga is finally able to admit the truth. Expression apologetic, he begins something close to a confession.

“I… I’m an awful guy. I probably don’t really understand what it means to marry Happine or Sunae, even now… I think I’ve always just let people tell me what I should do.”

With that out in the open, he steels himself.

“But I’ll make things clear. I’ll talk things through with them.”

“I see. Thank you.”

“So, um… There’s something I wanted to ask.”

“What is it?”

“What is it that you like about Miss Douve?”

It’s a pretty direct question, the same one that has been asked by countless women on our journey here. In response, Tahlan starts explaining in detail.

“You may think it strange, but while I’ve amused countless women, I’ve never made any of them genuinely happy. Lady Douve is the first in that regard.”

“Huh… Despite the fact that you’re so good at handling women?”

“I can’t help it. Women have always approached me first.” Tahlan looks extremely contrite as he explains, as though he’s offering an apology to all those unnamed women over the years. “It’s true that I can be thoughtful and that I’ve been blessed with good looks. I’m good at small talk and I’m of high birth. If I wished, I could probably seduce almost any woman in the world. However, my desires are such that I would take no pleasure in it.”

Saiga and I are struck dumb with shock. This man really is the epitome of the handsome prince, without anything to take away from that image. That is also why it’s so difficult for him to deal with women.

“I know how women want me to act, both in manner and in passion. I don’t find that act particularly bothersome…but it’s still tiring.”

It’s a struggle unique to handsome men. If he wanted to, he could woo countless women, assemble them into a harem, and even do a good job managing it, yet he’s never actually had a woman who was close to him in that way.

I mean, heck, it’d be completely understandable if he behaved arrogantly like Lady Douve, but he goes out of his way to act in the manner that the other person wants him to act. That itself is probably a sign of his honorable and gentle personality.

“But, that’s simply me playing the role of a woman’s ideal. It’s not actually me. I’m sure there are people who think it’s impressive that I can play that role, but…it’s exhausting to have to play a role all the time, even in the bedroom.”

“So you’re saying you couldn’t show your weaknesses because everyone has such high expectations of you?”

Saiga summarizes Tahlan very well. If everyone wants the ideal prince, then Tahlan will play that role. But in private, he would much rather be himself. Though, in Tahlan’s case, he’s plenty attractive even when he’s not playing a role.

“Sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it? I suppose it’s a genuine display of affection to reveal your weaknesses to someone, but it’s not something that these women would enjoy. There was a time when I thought I should direct my affection toward various women, like Saiga does, but I was too young to seduce women out of a sense of duty.”

“Surely that’s overthinking it a bit…”

Up to now Tahlan’s just explaining why he’s never been with anyone until Lady Douve. The important question, though, is why he eventually chose her.

“If I’m being blunt, I find subservient women like Miss Zuger difficult to deal with. I don’t have the strength of character to love a woman who, well, worships me, or is constantly afraid that I might leave her.”

“Huh...? Zuger? Really?!”

It’s true that Zuger is pretty much the mirror opposite of Lady Douve. Still, I didn’t expect Tahlan to be so blunt about it.

You know, back when I first met Saiga and his harem, I remember thinking they all seemed the sort to be part of a harem. It’s a pretty rude thought, thinking about it now. The truth is, though, that’s how they were, and that’s still true now, to a certain extent. Those three are still propping up Saiga.

Of course, I think Saiga has also grown to meet their expectations and be worthy of their support. Still, this is an extremely subjective appraisal on my part.

However, to a true handsome prince, the ideal prince, such women are just a burden. Tahlan is actually the ideal prince, but he’s also a person. That is why he struggles with living up to those expectations.

Meanwhile, the women who chase after him don’t have any interest in seeing those aspects of him. They just want to see him as the ideal prince, and have him be virtuous all the time. Tahlan understands that, which is why he doesn’t bother to show them his weaknesses, even though it taxes him emotionally.

“It would be charitable to describe them as gentlewomen who are willing to support and respect their man. For myself, though, I’d like to sit down in front of a woman I love, be myself, and relax. I’m still a man, after all. I do have my own desires.”

“I’ve never thought that way about Zuger, but...I understand. It’s true that I want to look cool in front of girls and I hesitate to show them the things that I’m ashamed about.”

“I agree completely. I struggle when Blois acts too submissively, and there are times where I find her tiresome when she’s like that.”

Tahlan’s been struggling to keep up an act, just like I have. It’s a different kind of act, but it’s still a similar struggle. It’s also something that’s hard for him to talk about, because Tahlan himself understands that his problem is one most people would love to have.

“The reason I found myself wanting to marry Blois is that, whatever else might be the case, we think of each other as equals. We can speak to one another without holding back.”

“I envy you for that, Master Sansui. I’ve always sought a woman like that, which is why Lady Douve’s confidence is so attractive to me. In front of her, I can be a mere mortal.”

Ah-ha, I see, so Tahlan has high expectations in a different way than Lady Douve does. It all makes sense now.

“You know, I figured you’d have no shortage of women seeking your hand, so I always thought you either had really odd tastes or were just being generous by choosing Lady Douve, but…now it makes sense.”

“Sansui, you can be pretty snarky, can’t you?”

“I can’t help it. I have my complaints about Lady Douve, as you know.”

I mean, she’s not an evil person, but she definitely has a twisted personality and equally twisted tastes. I figured anyone marrying Lady Douve would have otherwise been consigned to a cruel fate, but destiny has a way of making things work out for the best.

“Hahaha… It took traveling to a distant land to find friends like you two, with whom I can share my raw, unfiltered thoughts… I’ve been blessed in what I found there,” Tahlan says, laughing before he puts on a completely serious expression. “In truth, I should be the one to fight the Spirit Summoners. Even if I humiliate myself, I should prove my own convictions.”

The people who are going to fight this time are those of us from Arcana and the girls from Tempera Village. In terms of the conflict itself, that’s the right choice. It needs to be Arcanians who defeat those pushing Tahlan toward the throne, using our collective might to prove who’s right in this conflict.

But, what would actually happen if Tahlan and Sunae were to fight instead? Even with the help of the noble treasures, they probably couldn’t defeat the hand-picked Spirit Summoners chosen for this fight.

“It needs to be my sister or myself who crushes my mother’s ambition. But as for the ones who will actually fight… No, if I was to fight, I wouldn’t be able to win.”

I don’t know what we can say to Tahlan as he rues his lack of power.

“This is who I actually am. A man who should fight, but leaves it to others because he can’t win.”

“That’s not true.”

It’s Saiga, not I, who voices an objection to Tahlan’s characterization of himself.

“You didn’t stand back when we fought Master Fukei. You’re not a man who runs away just because he can’t win.”

“You’re right. Master Fukei really was strong. Compared to him, even the greatest Spirit Summoner isn’t much.”

These two fought Master Fukei with Ran while I was away. They had faced off against an overwhelmingly powerful individual, who had probably been the second most powerful Immortal in the world after my master.

“It was probably not an appropriate thing to feel at the time, but I was happy when he thought I was the strongest of our group. You’re right. I suppose I’m not that weak after all…”

Saiga, Tahlan, and even Ran are probably stronger than they once were. They’ve learned something from facing off against a powerful enemy, an experience I’ve never actually faced. No doubt they also saw the meaning of true strength as well when they watched my master fight Fukei.

It’s probably a bit late to mention this, but...

“Honestly, I envy you two.”

I tell them what I’m truly feeling. I never knew sharing one’s deepest feelings with trusted friends could be such a heart-warming thing.

Part 7 — Required Punishment

It's only now, a day or two away from the Magyan Kingdom, that I, Saiga Mizu, am sitting down to talk things out with Zuger, Happine, and Sunae. Um, and Eckesachs is sitting in on the conversation too, I guess.

Everyone's a lot calmer than I expected as the carriage trundles along the road. Sunae's almost scarily calm, as though she had decided that nothing's going to ruffle her. The other two seem reassured by her calm, given that Sunae's the one who has the most riding on this conversation.

"I know it's taken a long time for me to say this… But, I, Saiga Mizu, am the ace for House Batterabbe. I intend…to live out my life in the Arcana Kingdom. Just as I have to this point, I intend to train myself for the sake of the Arcana Kingdom, to fight for the Arcana Kingdom, and I'm fine with whatever the end result of that decision ends up being."

Happine looks really relieved at hearing those words. Yes, I should've made this clear a long time ago. Honestly, I'm embarrassed at how long I've been waffling about this.

"Which is why I have a reason to go to Magyan, but I don't intend to settle down there. So, if that's something you can't forgive, Sunae, I understand if you want to break up with me. I'm willing to have Zuger put a curse on me to prevent me from using my Royal Presence and Spirit Summoning from here on out."

Setting aside for a moment whether or not that'd be enough of a punishment for breaking her heart, given that Sunae had taught me a secret Art that's usually reserved for royals, limiting my use of that Art if I were to break up with her is the only correct course of action. I'm sure that Zuger wouldn't actually lay such a curse, but it's still something I need to do myself.

"But if you're okay with my choice, if you're willing to live in the Arcana Kingdom, Sunae, then I'll do whatever I can to make a life for us there. I'll do whatever it takes. Whether it means pleading with your dad, fighting, or even losing."

"Your words are pointless, Saiga. Your promises are always so cheap."

Sunae is surprisingly calm and collected in spite of what I'm saying. Of course, I'm sure that settling down in Magyan would have been her ideal outcome. That's probably why she looks a little disappointed in spite of her calm. At the same time, though, she seems to be at peace with my choice.

"I don't want to put it this way, but what point is there in you not using Spirit Summoning? You've learned how to use your Tainted Blood. That alone is enough to make up for not using Spirit Summoning."

"Yeah, you're right."

"Then it's pointless. It's true that it would protect the secrets of my family, but that's pretty much worthless as a way for you to apologize to me. Am I wrong?"

"No, you're right."

“Then let me ask the most important question. Why…why did you choose Arcana and House Batterabbe?” she asks in deadly earnest.

I also need to give her a proper answer as to why I’m not choosing Magyan. That was my responsibility, given that I sized up Sunae and Happine’s homelands and chose one of them as my home.

“Let me say this first. It’s not that I compared the two of you and decided I liked Happine better. I know this sounds skeezy, but I love both of you equally.”

Even I’m a bit put off by my own words as I say them. The fact that I’ve said them at all means that I’m not anything close to a good man. Or rather, the fact that I’m in this situation at all probably means I never was a good man to begin with. This situation is entirely due to my indecisiveness.

It wouldn’t have happened if I’d just said, “I’m already engaged to Happine, so I can’t marry you,” when Sunae proposed to me. I’m in this situation because I kept things vague and refused to make a clear decision.

“But I… I want to get stronger. That’s why I want to live in the Arcana Kingdom. I also owe quite a lot to House Batterabbe, to Happine’s dad. I have to repay that debt, and I can’t just use you as a reason to walk away from everything I owe them. That’s the reason why I’m choosing Arcana as my home.”

I know my words risk upsetting Happine, and that she’d be more than justified in punching me as I say them. At the very least, if I were a woman in Happine or Sunae’s shoes, I’d be really angry at hearing what I just said.

It’s not that I’m choosing where to live based on who I love more; rather, I’m going with the Arcana Kingdom because the terms are better there. Ultimately, I selected Happine for reasons that have nothing to do with her as a person. My decision is based on a comparison of their two countries, not on weighing my feelings for the two of them.

I love them both and I can’t say which one I love more. I feel that I have to tell them the truth, even if it means they both beat me up and I end up losing both of them in the process.

“Having made that clear, I need to apologize to you, Sunae. Even though I knew you were a princess from a far-off land, I didn’t think very seriously about your country or the fact that Spirit Summoning is an Art exclusive to your family. I only thought of you as someone who could teach me a new Rare Art.”

Those are the words of a total asshole. Even if they’re the complete truth and I mean no harm in thinking of her that way, it’s still a terrible thing to have said. As the person who said that, I logically consider myself a complete asshole as well.

“I don’t know what you, Zuger, and Happine all thought about me, but I never thought all that deeply about learning a new Art from you, or about being with you.”

“I see…”

“I’m sorry.”

I bow my head as I sit on the carriage seat. It's then that Sunae grabs me by the hair and pulls my face up.

"Hrmph!"

She doesn't slap me, exactly. Her nails, no, her *claws* , the ones grown with her Royal Presence, tear into my cheek. Blood sprays out of the wounds and splatters the interior of the carriage. Meanwhile, Eckesachs sits and watches. I get it, this isn't something she needs to be involved in.

The color drains from Happine and Zuger's faces, but they can't do anything but watch. I get that too. It's not like either of them have any fighting ability, and Sunae wields a Rare Art that truly shines in combat. It's true that she's not as strong as Ran, Sansui, or me, but she's still way stronger than your average girl.

"Sunae…"

"I'm not finished."

Her eyes shift from human to feline as she bites into my shoulder. She doesn't just break the skin; her fangs tear into my shoulder muscles and break the bone underneath.

"Owww!"

"Pathetic. The least you could do is bear it."

Allowing her Royal Presence to recede, Sunae wipes the blood off her mouth and fingers as she sits back down.

"A-A-Are you all right?! Lord Saiga?!"

"Yeah, I'm fine, Zuger… I can fix this myself."

I activate my Tainted Blood and my hair bleaches white. I can't easily regenerate lost muscle or skin like Ran, who's a genuine berserker, but the pain fades and the bleeding stops quickly enough. With that done, I then use my Mystic Arts to heal up the wounds. That said, I'm not able to cleanly heal everything. I've fixed the breaks in my bones, but there are still scars left on my skin from the clawing and biting.

"That'll be enough for now."

"Th-That's totally overdoing it! You've left scars on Saiga!"

"Hrmph. If you want to get rid of them, go have Suiboku help you."

Had it been anyone else, this would've been a murder, one prompted by a lovers' quarrel. Then again, considering I'm a man who's been two-timing, even three-timing, it's probably a fitting punishment for me.

"I'm both a woman and a princess. I'd rather not be under the care of another kingdom, and I did want to take Saiga back to my homeland. I've always thought he was important enough to do so, and it was because I wanted to take him back with me that I taught him Spirit Summoning," Sunae says, stating her perfectly understandable motivations.

Well, yeah, that's the best outcome for Sunae, and in the end that's what I decided not to do. That's why I feel I've earned this punishment. Because I've accepted her response, Sunae seems to believe that we're even, and she takes on the tone of someone who's set aside her ire.

“Being so familiar with my brother, Tahlan, your face is far too plain for me to fall in love with you at first sight. I wanted to marry you because you were strong and unusual. I figured it’d be easy to draw you away from a noblewoman of a mere savage kingdom.”

“*That* ’s what you thought of me?!”

“Of course. I’m sure that’s not much different from how you thought of me. You even seemed skeptical that I was a royal at all.”

“Well, sure…”

Yeah, of course, and it’s not like I took that fact very seriously either. I mean, Happine had a huge manor and lots of servants, but Sunae only had the Rare Art of Spirit Summoning. It had been an open question as to whether Spirit Summoning is actually the Art of kings and her use of it is proof of her royal heritage. You further have to consider that there are all kinds of countries in the world, including really small ones.

“But…that’s simply what started my relationship with Saiga. Understand, Saiga, that if you had proved to be pathetic, I would have never brought you to meet my father, the king. I would have cut my losses, killed you in your sleep, and told myself that I wasn’t thinking clearly when I met you.”

Sunae easily could have done that if she had wanted to. Sansui might be able to deal with a sneak attack like that, but I can’t. Even if I can see the future, there’s nothing I can do about it when I’m asleep.

“Unlike my brother, you’re not a perfect man. You’re a rare find, but you’re far from omnipotent, and now I can hardly consider you the strongest, either. But, despite that, you’ve endured. You never broke. You never let your defeats crush you and you never shied away from battle.”

Now that she mentions it, I don’t think I’ve ever actually beaten a worthy opponent. Is that really okay?

“Of course, I do want you to win. However…however…this is also important. Sansui and Fukei are some of the most powerful warriors in this world, far superior to you in strength. Yet in spite of that, you never ran from them, never avoided fighting them, just because you had no chance of victory. I believe that it’s far more important to fight a much more powerful opponent and survive, rather than fighting a weaker opponent and winning,” she says, confessing that, in her heart, she wanted me to win.

Still, Sunae’s also telling me that she feels it’s important that I never run away, that I survived my losses, and that I kept training afterward. Kind of scary, though, since she’s still got blood on her lips.

“You defeated me. That was the beginning of our relationship. Your actions after that have always met my expectations. Your decision here, today, also fits along those lines. So I’ll respect and go along with your decision.”

“Then why did you claw and bite him?!”

“Because he pissed me off! I already knew that’s what he was going to say, but he could have phrased it more tactfully!”

I suppose this means that, for the moment, Sunae has forgiven me. The wounds don't hurt anymore, but I bet my face looks like a mess. Not sure I wanna look in a mirror right now.

"Ahm… Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, Zuger."

Even from my own perspective, the fact that it's taken this long to have this conversation is pretty lame. Of course she was going to be angry. We've been traveling this whole time, in a bunch of carriages loaded with treasure, and I choose this moment to have this chat? C'mon! There's no forgiving being vague or half-hearted about my commitments. That was true even before this point.

"Anyway, I'm glad you finally spoke up about this, but I wish you could have done so sooner. I still had a faint hope we could live together in my homeland…but I think this is for the best."

"Why? You always looked down on me, telling me that I'm a mere noble, while you're a royal back in your homeland!"

"There's no one like Sansui or Suiboku in my homeland. If Saiga were to settle in my kingdom, he might very well stop training himself. If that happens, he might end up a shell of the man he is now."

Those words hit really close to home. It's true, I'm not studious or dedicated like Master Suiboku or Sansui. I wouldn't go and hole up in the woods just to train. If I didn't have anyone to challenge me, I'd probably be happy with whatever level of progress I'd made up to that point.

"At this point, I doubt there's anyone in my homeland that can match Saiga in strength. It would be easy for him to become king of Magyan. However, Saiga doesn't have the temperament to be king. I've seen what a real ruler is like in Ukyou, and now that I know the difference, I can't imagine Saiga becoming anything like that man."

Yeah, I agree. Ukyou is definitely an emperor. Not in terms of his title or in name, but he carries the full weight of his country's obligations and its power. I couldn't do that. I've always just gone with the flow. I leave my own feelings up in the air, just waiting for someone to give me directions or instruction. That kind of person could never be king.

"Which is why I'm at peace with the idea of settling in the Arcana Kingdom. If you're going to marry me and govern a fifth of a great kingdom as the head of one of the Great Houses, then you'll be of a rank worthy of a daughter of the royal house of Magyan. Of course, I still would have preferred if you had made that decision earlier. If I'm honest, I was always worried about what you might do," Sunae says, sounding a little pouty.

I really feel guilty for my lack of decisiveness.

"Yeah, I'm sorry."

"Hold on! Promise you're going to marry me too! Right now! Right here!" Happine says angrily. Well, sure, I understand her anger.

"Um, yes. Of course I'll marry you, Happine, and I'll also become the head of House Batterabbe. I'll also marry you as well, Zuger."

“Can’t you make it sound a little weightier?! Like you did a little earlier?!”

“Th-That can wait, can’t it, Lady Happine?! Please calm down!”

Zuger tries to calm Happine, but she’s not easily placated. I get that. It’s like I’m treating her as a complete aside. But if I propose to her now, that’ll just confirm that she’s of secondary importance.

“Calm down, second wife.”

“Who are you calling second?! I’m the official wife! The first wife!”

“Let’s discuss that later. My father has to save face in that regard, at least,” Sunae says, thus making clear her stance that she’s still a princess of an entire kingdom before continuing. “Which is why I want to properly settle the issue my mother has raised. I know my brother wants to deal with it himself, but I have a role to play as well… No, there’s a role that only I can play.”

I remember how Tahlan regretted his powerlessness at the Donzila palace. Depending on how you look at it, it’s true that Tahlan isn’t actually counting on Sunae to do anything. However, Sunae seems to believe that she, more than Tahlan, should do something to solve this problem.

“Saiga. While I won’t be fighting, I intend to do my duty as a royal. Which is why…I’m counting on you when it comes to the duels.”

“Yup! Leave it to me!”

I’m really happy now that I’ve worked so hard to become stronger, because that strength lets me respond to her trust in me with complete confidence.

Part 8 — Kingship (1 of 2)

Perhaps it goes without saying, but in this world, in this particular era, borders aren't clearly defined from one end of a country to another. Moreover, there's just no clear ownership of a piece of land around the edges of a country.

Of course, there's a vague "border" that defines the difference between the Donzila Kingdom and the Magyan Kingdom. But, it's not like there are clearly defined borders like in twenty-first century Earth, and there's a lot of land that just sits there unclaimed.

For example, let's say there's a desert. While there might be territorial skirmishes along the routes that connect the oases in that desert, the rest of the desert is just empty land filled with sand, and no one is actually in charge of it.

Basically, the borders and land claims in this world focus on useful places like farmland, and the area between countries that's of no use to anyone just sits there, unclaimed, serving as a nebulous buffer zone between the two countries. Magyan and Donzila being on such friendly terms is probably due to the fact that there's no useful land located on their shared border to fight over.

At any rate, there's a fairly large army waiting for us on our planned route once we depart the Donzila Kingdom proper.

"Your thoughts, Sansui?"

"There's no hostility emanating from them. Quite a few have the Royal Presence, but there's nothing else unusual about that group."

"I see… Just how many of them have the Royal Presence?"

"About ten percent of the total."

"That's quite a few. So they must be their elites."

His Fathership, Tahlan, Sunae, and Saiga all join me on horseback as we make our way toward the army assembled in front of us. I inform everyone on our side that the army isn't here to drive us away. Not that I can imagine them ever doing something so disrespectful.

This journey's already taken us several months to get here. If they were to turn us away at the border, we'd be perfectly justified in telling every country we passed through on the way back that the Magyans had been rude and graceless.

Tahlan and Sunae have both already told countless people on the way here that they're marrying into noble families from a distant land, so there's no need for the Magyans to go out of their way to embarrass themselves. Technically, we have a large number of Arcanian troops with our caravan, but they're only there to protect the treasures we're carrying for the dowries. There's no way that anyone could think we've come this far to invade, so they should let us in without much trouble.

"Prince Tahlan! Princess Sunae!"

“Ah, thank you for coming! I appreciate the fact that you’ve come out to welcome us. I can finally rest easy.”

“We’re so, so very glad that you’ve returned! From here on out, we, the elite of Magyan, will protect you!”

A man on horseback, evidently the commander of the Magyan force, happily gallops over to greet Tahlan. Along with his approach, much of the force prepares to fall into escort formation around the Arcanian convoy.

“I trust I find you well?”

“As for that, we’ll have time to discuss it in detail on our leisurely journey to the capital.”

“I see. Then these are lists detailing the members of our delegation, a manifest of what we’re carrying, and letters of introduction. Send them to my siblings via messenger.”

There’s a remarkable amount of respect emanating from the members of the Magyan contingent. Tahlan may not have the Royal Presence, but he’s still this kingdom’s greatest swordsman.

“Understood, Your Highness. Prince Tahlan, Princess Sunae, may I trouble you to introduce us to your companions?”

“Heh. This is the woman that is to be my wife, and her father.”

“This is the man who is to become my husband. Treat him suitably.”

“Ahh, I see! Then we’ll do our very best to protect them!”

It seems word has gotten back to the Magyans from the neighboring kingdoms. Still, the commander confirms our identities as a mark of respect and happily moves to protect our group.

“Your kingdom is more impressive than I imagined.”

“You honor me with your praise.”

Seems His Fathership has noticed the descriptions he’d heard in Donzila weren’t exaggerated.

The commander made sure to say that we’d take a leisurely route back, which means he’s been told not to hurry back to the capital. That can only be because something has actually happened to the king, but also that the kingdom itself hasn’t suffered in spite of that.

“They really are my dear siblings.”

Tahlan feels shame at having been out of the country when something happened to his father, as does Sunae.

“Allow me to introduce myself properly. I am General Abra, tasked with escorting Prince Tahlan and Princess Sunae back to the palace. It’s an honor to make your acquaintance.”

Since Abra indicated he had a private matter to discuss with Tahlan and Sunae, the three of them—along with me, Saiga, Lady Douve, His Fathership, and Happine—are riding with Abra in his carriage.

Abra is a man with finely chiseled features and an extremely muscular body. While he has a dagger on his hip, he isn’t otherwise armed. Based on

that, he's clearly a master of the Royal Presence, perhaps even related directly to the royal family. Spirit Summoning must be an Art whose secrets are closely held within the royal family and the kingdom itself. That's almost definitely the case, given that Magyan would otherwise be at a numerical disadvantage against its neighbors.

"I've already heard from the king of Donzila. Father is ill, yes?"

"Indeed, Your Highness. Even the palace physicians can do nothing but pray for his recovery..."

So, the king is actually sick. Still, based on Abra's tone, maybe it's not as bad as Tahlan had feared.

"Is father doing that poorly?"

"He still has his senses and an appetite, but his strength has continued to fade, and at this point he finds it difficult to stand..."

"Father is that ill...?"

Sunae seems quite shocked at the news. Tahlan doesn't voice his own disquiet, but his expression betrays his feelings. Of course, children who rejoice in learning that their father can't even stand anymore are worse than merely heartless.

"Your Highness, rumors have spoken of you bringing back foreigners who can use healing Arts..."

"Yes. I've brought several specialists in that Art. Moreover, as I've listed in the manifest, we have Coiled Peaches and Divine Ginseng."

"Huh?"

Abra seems completely caught off guard at the latter bit of news. Apparently, Magyans are more familiar with the Immortal Arts, and Abra is thus so surprised he temporarily forgets his manners. I suppose that can't be helped, since neither of those is a complete unknown to him, but rather a medicinal fruit only spoken of in legends.

"M-My apologies, Your Highness... Do you truly have such things?"

"Yes. I've eaten the Coiled Peach myself. I can guarantee its effects, but...I suppose I can't simply give it to father."

"Indeed..."

"Allow me to be blunt. Who is currently running this kingdom?"

Abra hesitates a moment before answering Tahlan's question.

"Prince Heki."

"As I thought. He's the right choice. I have nothing to worry about if Heki is in charge."

"Yes. His Majesty specifically chose Prince Heki to serve as regent when he fell ill, and he also commanded us to stand together under the prince's leadership for the duration of the crisis. His Highness has done nothing to betray His Majesty's expectations, and is doing a fine job as regent."

"Regent, not successor. That means he hasn't formally been named the next king. But knowing father, even if he does recover, he'll likely say he's no longer strong enough to be worthy of the throne. No doubt Heki will be crowned soon."

Seems that Tahlan is fine with the selection. At the very least, he thinks his younger brother Heki is a worthy successor to the throne. Yet Abra, who's been serving and supporting Heki this whole time, seems to have his doubts.

"However…with His Majesty confined to his bed, the kingdom has been lacking in unity…"

"That's to be expected. It's not a simple matter to fill in for a man as great as our father. No doubt Heki will be unfavorably compared to him at first, but that's how it always is at the start of a reign."

Abra remains silent for a moment.

"What is it? Have any of my other siblings disputed Heki's claim to the throne? That's perfectly within their rights. If he can't contain them, then he has no right to rule as king."

"I hesitate to tell you, however…your mother…your mother has argued that you should take the throne, even if it means changing the laws of the kingdom."

Tahlan has already heard about the development, but having it confirmed is a heavy blow. Having feigned ignorance until this point, he answers sadly, "I see. I'd heard from Princess Gayaou of Donzila, but it seems mother is intent on carrying out her scheme."

"I believe it's because your mother is motivated by her love of you."

"No need to try to console me. Forgive me for making you deliver difficult news. You're dismissed for now."

Tahlan sends the apologetic Abra out of the carriage and lets out a deep sigh. He isn't the only one; Sunae also looks extremely embarrassed by the news. No doubt both of them are ashamed at having forced a loyal retainer to speak ill of their mother.

It's not that I don't understand their mother's feelings. Despite the fact that she was the First Consort and gave birth to the eldest prince, that boy didn't have the Royal Presence. When she finally had a daughter with the Royal Presence, it turned out that her talent wasn't particularly strong. I can easily imagine that her life afterward had been difficult, but she should have been able to accept that fate.

"Ah, if only it were just ramblings…but it seems that it's far beyond that point. No doubt it's enjoyable for her to dream of improper glories, but it's a complete nightmare for those who get dragged into it."

"As you say. Such a foolish thing for her to do," Tahlan says, nodding his agreement to His Fathership's statement of regret.

If it had just been a run-of-the-mill plot by foreign princesses or the queen consort, the general wouldn't have treated the news with such gravity. Abra is truly concerned that this situation could develop into a civil war, or even a larger war between neighboring countries.

"Sunae, I need an honest opinion. If I became king, do you think the people would accept it?"

“Not all of them, but I believe at least half would do so. I also believe that both sides would be extremely zealous in their chosen positions.”

“That’s the worst possible combination.”

Tahlan falls silent for a moment. No doubt he’s chastising himself.

Lady Douve smiles gently and embraces him. She looks both pleased yet sympathetic, tenderly offering him her compassion. It’s clear that he feels such sincere pain for his people, and that’s why she values and loves him.

“Brother, I have something I wish to ask of you.”

And it’s not just Lady Douve looking at him in that way. Saiga and Happine both stare intently at Tahlan as Sunae speaks.

“On this matter… Could you leave persuading mother to me?”

There’s nothing strange about her request. Tahlan’s mother is also Sunae’s mother, and the matter of succession also is something that concerns her. Still, it’s surprising to see that she’s offering to help her brother carry the difficult burden that’s upon his shoulders. I always thought she saw him as someone to admire.

“Sunae…”

Tahlan has always regarded Sunae as the younger sister who’s constantly trying to follow in his footsteps, which is exactly why he is the one that’s most surprised at her request.

“My, my, it seems your sister is quite motivated. I think leaving this in her hands is what a good brother should do in this situation, no?” Lady Douve proposes with an amused smile. If Sunae succeeds, that takes care of the problem; if she fails, I suppose Lady Douve intends to have a laugh at her expense. It really speaks to her twisted personality, but what she’s saying in this case is perfectly right.

“All right. Sunae, I’ll leave it to you. But if things go wrong, don’t hesitate to rely upon me.”

“No, brother. I already have people I can rely upon,” Sunae says with a dignified air. On either side of her, Saiga and Happine nod along with serious expressions.

“All right, then I leave it to you.”

It seems that there are women other than Lady Douve who Tahlan doesn’t have to play a role for. Having realized that, Tahlan’s lips quirk in a smile of reassurance.

Getting here has been quite a journey. I suppose that it hasn’t been that lengthy given just how long my life has been, but I’ve felt every minute of this particular trek. Meanwhile, as I enter the Magyan palace, I can’t help but wonder what kinds of scars my master left on *this* region.

Tahlan and His Fathership are leading the procession, of course, and right on their flanks are Sunae and Happine, with the rest of us following behind them. This is my first time in Magyan’s palace, but it’s not that different from Donzila’s palace, so I don’t feel any particular stir at seeing it.

However, the other members of the Arcana delegation are all agitated. After all, this kingdom's in the middle of a succession crisis. Lady Douve's still cheerful, but I've given up on doing anything about that.

"Yo."

We're shown into the throne room. There's a great chair set upon a dais over a short flight of steps and it, like the one in Donzila, is lavishly decorated with fabric. Yet, the man waiting for us isn't seated on the throne itself, but rather upon the steps leading up to the dais. He's a giant of a man with wide shoulders, whose build is more like that of a powerful warrior than a handsome prince.

"Long time no see, big bro."

Should I describe him as disrespectful or humble? This man is the closest to the Magyan throne but has decided not to take a seat upon it, after all. He grins at Tahlan.

Everyone else is looking from Tahlan to that man and back. There are more than just the man and his bodyguards in the throne room; the others present are probably siblings of Sunae and Tahlan, along with the king's consorts, and a few people who also look like the king's chief retainers. The ones most on edge are the people who look like members of the royal family.

In particular, the glare from the person who is probably Tahlan and Sunae's mother is intense, comparable in intensity to Chette's. A few others also direct intense stares at Tahlan, despite not being visible from where we are in the throne room. They're probably foreign princesses of one sort or another. It must be pretty difficult to be an attractive man.

"Yes. It's been a long time, Heki."

Tahlan and Heki approach one another and embrace without any sign of artifice. They both feel sincere relief at seeing one another. That's at least one saving grace in this whole situation.

"The whole country's abuzz. You're still popular here, big bro, even though you've been gone a while."

"All that is only because of father's authority. It's only because the royal family is firmly established that a prince can go off wandering."

"Wandering, mm? Hah! You're still a bigger man than me, big bro!"

They switch from an embrace to a handshake, exchanging a firm grasp. I can tell that they're both simply happy to see one another. It's a beautiful show of love between brothers. There are several other people looking upon the scene with displeasure, but for Tahlan and Heki, it's a meaningful moment.

"Now, introduce me to the steely lady that's managed to win your heart."

"Yes, of course… This is Douve Sepaeda, my soul mate."

My aura-sensing ability momentarily goes numb as the room overflows with intense emotion. It's sort of like how looking into the sun temporarily

blinds you. The sheer resentment flowing into the room is so obvious that there isn't a single person in the room who doesn't notice it.

These are probably the feelings of the women that have crushes on Tahlan, and the sheer strength of their animus is disturbing.

"An honor to make your acquaintance. Douve Sepaeda, at your service."

"Damn, you've found a woman with ice water in her veins."

Lady Douve's smile doesn't even waver at the resentment directed at her. In fact, she can't hide the sheer enjoyment she's getting from all that negative attention, her lips quirked in a cheerful smile. Even though there's enough hostility directed at her to strike dead an entire country, she's overflowing with joy.

Just seeing her expression is enough to impress Heki, along with me.

"This is the man who will become my father-in-law."

"I…am the Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda, one of the Great Houses of the Arcana Kingdom. I have come here to seal the marriage between my daughter, Douve, and your kingdom's prince."

"Ahh, I see! I didn't detect any hint of fighting ability from Lady Douve, but…I can tell that you, her father, are a man who's fought many battles. We are a kingdom of warriors, and we value prowess in battle. I had thought that my older brother intended to marry into a weak family, but it seems my concerns were unfounded!"

Magyan is a kingdom where both men and women are judged by their prowess in battle, which is why there are many people here who hold Lady Douve in contempt. His Fathership stepping forward actually goes a long way to ease the tension in the room.

"Hey, Sunae."

"Y-Yes, Brother Heki?"

"Just what do you have to say for yourself, eh?"

Sunae's gone stiff with anxiety and Heki grabs her head, shaking it this way and that.

Ah, as I thought. Guess it wasn't a good thing that Sunae, a princess with a claim to the throne, left the kingdom on her own.

"Father, your mother, and all of our other siblings were worried about you! Imagine leaving without telling any of us!"

"M-My apologies!"

"Make sure you go and get your beating! Tsk... So, you're Sunae's fiancé?"

The subject then turns to Saiga. I'm sure he can handle being physically attacked, but I'm worried about his ability to cope with diplomatic greetings. I mean, he seems to be the most nervous one here.

"Yes! I'm Saiga! Saiga Mizu!"

There's an extended period of silence from the Magyan prince.

"Um, well...!"

As Heki gives him an appraising look, Saiga's voice cracks during his greeting. His anxiety has gotten the better of him and he's clearly flustered.

"Please allow me to marry your sister!"

The throne room goes completely silent in what seems like sheer exasperation. Of course, it's something he would have needed to say eventually, but not right here and now.

Heki snorts. "Hahahaha! You've brought home a pure one, haven't you, Sunae? I don't know what he's like as a warrior, but as a man...he's adorable!"

"Brother Heki... Saiga isn't weak..."

"We can make sure of that later. I'm looking forward to seeing you in action, O Sunae's chosen man."

"Y-Yes sir!"

Well, yes, he's actually really strong. Even without Eckesachs, he can probably beat most opponents. I don't have any concerns about that particular area, but...

"Still... The Arcana Kingdom. The Four Great Houses. I'd never heard of House Sepaeda or House Batterabbe before, but...looking at the manifest and the actual treasures really opened my mind. The world really is big; I never expected such a powerful kingdom to exist so far away. Anyway, once again, let me welcome you to our kingdom, O people of distant lands! Allow our entire kingdom to welcome you!"

His Fathership's attitude has relaxed somewhat following that speech, probably because he's been reassured that Heki really seems to be a decent choice for the throne. He hasn't said anything out of line, and he's behaving in a way worthy of a regent. He hasn't made any rash decisions yet, either.

"We've prepared a banquet, so let's have your guests rest until then. Big bro and Sunae, go have an audience with His Majesty. Let him see the faces of your betrothed."

"A moment."

The one who stops the proceedings with a sudden statement, as expected, is the woman who appears to be Tahlan and Sunae's mother. She

clearly possesses the Royal Presence and she looks like Sunae, so I'm probably right in my assumption. Her interjection changes the whole atmosphere of the throne room.

"I'm told that the Arcana Kingdom has advanced healing Arts and that Tahlan has invited wielders of those Arts into our kingdom... I am further informed that there are legendary fruits among the treasures you've brought with you."

"Yes. That's correct, mother."

"Then should you not carry them with you when you meet His Majesty?"

She really does cut to the chase, doesn't she? Well, sure, I guess that's understandable, since both her son and daughter may very well end up leaving the kingdom.

"No doubt His Majesty will be pleased with the gifts."

"Hahaha! You exaggerate, mother! From what I hear from Abra, he's still in his right mind, and he can even hold conversations! If I take physicians and medicine to father, he'll yell at me for treating him like an invalid!" Tahlan says, laughing.

Heki joins in, saying, "Indeed. I'm sure father will recover just by seeing big bro and his bride, and no doubt the moment he sees Sunae return from her unannounced trip, he'll get up and start lecturing her!"

The two brothers are clearly trying to muddy the waters, offering up their closeness as siblings and their father's own reputation as distractions from the interjection.

Saiga looks on in wide-eyed admiration at their skill. This is one of those things that neither of us can actually do, since situations like these are where basic intelligence and breeding have a lot of impact.

"I see. Then I will wait for you in the reception room. Sunae, please prepare yourself for my lecture. Tahlan, you have guests here to see you from the neighboring kingdoms. Make certain you greet them."

"Yes, of course."

"I'll be there shortly."

It's still a tense situation. Although Sunae and Tahlan's mother tries her best to gracefully handle the situation, it's impossible to ignore the tension in her mannerisms. This is quite clear to everyone else, and certainly doesn't need an Immortal's ability to read auras.

Part 9 — Kingship (2 of 2)

As Tahlan and his fiancée Douve follow Heki to the king's bedroom, Sunae and I, her fiancé, Saiga Mizu, join them.

"Sorry about that, big bro. You come home with a good woman and yet your country's a royal mess," Heki says casually on our way there. Unlike the tone he took earlier in the throne room, he sounds a bit worn out now. This is probably closer to what he actually feels, but this sort of demeanor isn't something he could have used with so many other people watching.

"Heki, you have no reason to apologize. The fault lies all with me. Even if others want to raise me up, they're just caught up in their own passions, and it's not through any fault of yours."

"Eh, that's not true. After all, the man who's gonna be king can't keep his own country in line. Hell, we've even got foreign countries sticking their noses into our business. That means they don't take me seriously."

Heki clearly has a sense of responsibility fitting his rank. I guess he feels that it's his responsibility to take care of this succession business, and he regrets not being able to solve it.

"I wanted to get all of this settled before you guys got home, but... Well, the first consort has a lot more power than I thought."

It's not that he's giving up on the effort, but he's also clearly not making much headway.

"Just in case, big bro... If you listen to your mother and end up king, the people who supported your effort will start asking you to repay the favors they did for you. It'd definitely be an unholy mess."

"That goes without saying. Besides, my intention is to leave this country. Me, king? That's a tasteless joke."

Heki smirks at Tahlan's remark, even as he looks Douve over again. It's not that he's ogling her or anything, but rather that he's teasing his elder brother for being so thoroughly in love with her.

"Gotcha. So it's love, huh?"

"Yes, indeed. The Arcana Kingdom is quite a fun place."

"Glad to hear it... So, what are you going to do? I mean, you don't actually have to *do* anything; we have it all handled. After all, the whole thing is about my claim to the throne."

Yeah, he's got a point. Tahlan plans to put in the effort to avoid being the king, but Heki and the other claimants to the throne need to put in the effort to actually *become* king.

"Brother Heki, can you let me take care of it?"

"Ehhh?" Heki says with clear displeasure in response to Sunae's request.

Well, yeah, I get that. Sunae left the country without permission and is, in a very real sense, the reason why their mom's out of control. I also think there's a huge difference in terms of trust between leaving it to Tahlan and letting Sunae handle it. Still, that's exactly why I need to speak up.

“I’d also like to ask that you let Sunae handle this,” I say, stepping forward to support her.

“You’re gonna stick your nose into the royal family’s affairs?”

“I’m Sunae’s man, not some stranger.”

Heki remains ominously silent, trying to intimidate me. Unfortunately for him, that’s not enough to make me back down. Compared to Fukei, Heki’s not scary at all. Besides, I could probably take him in a fight.

“You’ve got balls, I’ll give you that. It’s not like you were putting on an act earlier, right? You might not have any social skills, but you can fight, eh?”

Heki bares his teeth in a predatory grin, but I don’t find him threatening at all. Besides, as the man who stepped up as Sunae’s ally, I can’t act like a weakling now.

“Enough, Heki. Sunae chose Saiga for his strength, and you don’t stand a chance against him.”

“Big bro, you mean to say he’s a lot stronger than I am?”

“Precisely. Saiga is even stronger than father.”

Heki’s attitude softens after Tahlan says his piece. I think he’s coming around to the idea of at least trusting me a little bit.

“Well, fine. I guess we’ll find out what the place big bro and Sunae are marrying into is like by having you actually fight.”

“Yes, that’s right. I’m sure mother wants that to happen, as well, so we can just let this all play out.”

In this kingdom, royals aren’t accepted as royals unless they’re strong, so I have to be strong if I want to marry a royal. Otherwise, the people here won’t respect me. I don’t mind people disrespecting me, necessarily, but I don’t want Sunae feeling ashamed among the people of her homeland. That is why I need to be able to beat those Donzilan princesses.

We quickly reach the king’s bedroom as we chat. It’s a room fit for a king, both really big and lavishly decorated. I guess this is kind of obvious, but it’s much more impressive than the guest rooms in Donzila’s royal palace.

However, the man sleeping there is so debilitated that it’s hard to believe he’s the king. He seems to still have his wits about him, but his body’s grown really feeble. He seems to be a very large and well-built person, but he’s so weak now that it’s hard for him to even sit up in bed.

“Bahahahaha! This is delicious!”

Well, he *was* so weak. He’s better now. Of course, it’s not like I managed to heal him with my entry-level Mystic Arts. We didn’t use the Coiled Peaches listed in the manifest, nor did we call any of the Mystics versed in healing to the bedroom.

It’s a lot simpler, actually. I snuck in one of the Coiled Peaches that Master Suiboku had given us for our own use in emergencies, then I sliced

it up and fed him a few small pieces. Having partaken, His Majesty quickly got better before our eyes.

"So this is the legendary fruit... Amazing!"

"Damn, old man... You've completely healed up, haven't you...?"

Heki clearly didn't expect the fruit to have such a dramatic effect, so he's floored as he watches his dad. I admit, it's not just him who's surprised. Tahlan, Sunae, and I are also in awe at the Coiled Peach's sheer efficacy. I'm left impressed once again at the fact that Master Suiboku is able to do just about everything.

"So, there's more, right? Bring it to me!"

"Father, eating too much is bad for your health. This is plenty."

"Yeah, that's right, old man. You're all better now."

"Yep! Look at these arms! I feel like I could yank a tree right out of the ground."

Magyan Khan, King of Magyan and father to Sunae, Tahlan, and Heki, simply can't contain his laughter at having recovered so quickly. Our original plan was to secretly feed him Coiled Peach slices over time, so it'd look like he recovered gradually and naturally. If we'd managed that, no one would have been able to credit his recovery to Tahlan, but honestly, Magyan Khan doesn't look like someone who can put on that sort of act.

"I didn't expect he'd be this energetic... Damn, we might've moved too quickly, big bro."

"Oh, come now... I'm surprised too. This fruit's legends clearly weren't exaggerated at all."

"I feel like I can give you a bunch of new younger siblings! At least ten of them!"

Ah, so *this* is how energetic you need to be to have a harem. I mean, I feel the same way as Tahlan regarding the speed of his father's recovery, but I also can't help but think about how the genuine article here is a lot more impressive than my own attempts at wrangling all those women.

"Holy crap, old man, keep it in your pants. That's the promise, remember?"

"You say that, but...my body's overflowing with energy! How am I supposed to release all the frustration from being stuck in bed for so long?!"

"Go train or something... Anyway, big bro's come back, so I wanna deal with all the domestic problems that have built up. All of us claimants are in agreement about that."

"You're right. Blasted Sukreen... Engaging in such lunacy."

Sukreen is the name of Sunae and Tahlan's mom. The king sighs deeply atop his bed as he reflects on how his own wife is trying to split his kingdom in two.

"Still... Before that, I have to express my appreciation. Lady Douve, I'm truly thankful for the medicinal fruit that has cured my illness. You are likewise to be commended for your efforts in dealing with a scandal in my own kingdom. I swear that I shall repay this debt."

“My, my… Such an admirable spirit. However, ‘father,’ if you’ll just let me have Tahlan, that’ll be more than enough thanks for us.”

“No, no, as the ruler of a kingdom, that’s not nearly enough. It seems you’ve done quite a bit for my son, as well.”

After saying that, the king suddenly looks really angry. He’s in a rage, as though a switch just flipped inside him.

“Sunae! How dare you leave the kingdom?! Have you no realization of your responsibilities as one with a claim to the throne?!”

“M-My apologies! Father!”

“You fool!”

Her dad’s fist lands on Sunae’s head. It looks like it really hurts, but I don’t feel like I should step in to protect her.

“So, you’re the man who’s seduced my daughter, eh?!”

“Y-Yes! Sunae and I are in a committed relationship!”

If I’m honest, it’s only been a committed relationship for a couple of days. I’m pretty sure he’d murder me if I said that, though.

“That goes without saying! If it was anything else, I would have killed you where you stand!”

That’s the most malice I’ve ever heard behind the word “kill.” It’s backed by an anger so intense I almost feel like my heart might stop just from being on the receiving end of it.

“Tahlan departed in the correct fashion, but you left without permission! Do you really think you can just get engaged without asking anyone?!”

“M-My apologies!”

“You do understand that Sukreen went off the deep end when you left the kingdom, yes?! You’re only one of my potential successors, but to Sukreen you were her last hope! Remember that when you think of what you’ve done!” Sunae’s dad yells at her in a voice loud enough to echo in the hall outside the room. He’s really scary…

“You! Your name!”

“Saiga! Saiga Mizu, sir!”

“I’ll give my complete backing to Lady Douve and Tahlan, but not to you! I’ll rend you to pieces with my claws and fangs when I’m able to show my recovery!”

I knew he was going to say *something* along those lines, but it’s a lot worse than I expected. Neither Sunae nor I have anything to say in response.

“Now, Heki. How do you intend to deal with Sukreen?”

Evidently, Sunae’s dad has said all he intends to say about the matter and moves the discussion to matters of politics. Even as he’s angry at Sunae and me, he’s also still concerned about the unrest building in his kingdom.

“I was going to beat her down in public when she challenged me.”

“Was? What’s changed?”

“Sunae wants to do it so her fiancé has a chance to shine.”

“Eh? Sunae? Not Tahlan?”

Even her dad is surprised that Sunae has proposed to do something about it herself.

Sunae, with the expression of a proper princess, replies calmly, “I believe mother will accept a challenge if we gather powerful warriors to fight the most skilled members of the Arcana delegation. It’d give her an opportunity to show the people that she has the strength to challenge Brother Heki.”

“Oh?”

From what Princess Gayaou was saying, several princesses intend to vie for Tahlan’s hand and fight in his stead. If we fight those princesses and beat them, we can wreck those plans. Even if we lose, that just means Heki and the others will need to fight them themselves. There’s no downside for the Magyan Kingdom.

“Not a bad idea. But, Sunae, are you sure about this? Does your lot have the ability to actually fight in front of the king?”

“There’s no issue at all. I’m certain they’ll win.”

“Quite confident, aren’t you? The women Sukreen’s going to bring forward are all a lot stronger than you. Can wielders of other Arts actually win in a no-holds-barred fight with Spirit Summoners?”

“Father, Brother Heki, that knowledge is the greatest treasure I’ve brought home with me.”

Both Heki and the king only know about Spirit Summoning and Shadow Summoning. In spite of that, they’re confident in their strength, which is why they’re voicing their concerns. However, Sunae is fully aware that their worries are misplaced.

“After I left the kingdom, I met many new people and witnessed all sorts of combat... In those battles, I became painfully aware of the limits of the Royal Presence and of Spirit Summoning.”

Her dad and Heki are speaking to her not as her dad and brother, but as a king and prince. Sunae, in turn, is responding as a princess.

“The Royal Presence and Spirit Summoning are powerful, and so we royals are powerful. Even one such as myself, one of the least talented among the royal family, faced little in the way of serious opposition at first. However...I also became painfully aware that, eventually, we and our neighboring kingdoms will be wiped out if we stick solely to our traditions.”

What Sunae says next catches both Tahlan and I by surprise.

“I realize now that the Spirit Summoning that we use is an Art specialized toward fighting Shadow Summoners and the Marked.”

Now that she mentions it, she’s right. I can only use a certain amount of Spirit Summoning, but that’s never really caused me much trouble. Even though I can’t take the Spirit Animal form that Sunae can, it’s still enough for me to fight effectively in Arcana and Domino. Using full power with Spirit Summoning is also exhausting, so it’s inefficient for me to rely on it.

“Of course, Spirit Summoning also displays the authority of the king and allows us to commune with our ancestral spirits. However, by seeing the

wider world, I discovered that there's a limit to what we can accomplish with our current knowledge of Spirit Summoning."

"Huh, that makes sense. I don't know about other Arts, but it's true that Spirit Summoning is certainly too focused on fighting Shadow Summoners and the Marked. I suppose you've learned something after all. We'll be perfectly fine should we face aggression from the neighboring kingdoms, but if far-off countries like Arcana and its neighbors were to invade us, we might not be able to win."

"No, we would most definitely lose." Sunae tells a brutal truth to her father, even though he's just recovered from a serious illness, because she is absolutely convinced that what she's saying is right. "Please consider this to be part of a long-term objective for our kingdom, and not simply a means for stopping mother's ambitions."

"For you to say something like that… I suppose it's proof you've grown in your travels," Magyan Khan says as he grins and slaps his knee.

By contrast, Heki looks like he's steeled himself for what's to come, balling his hand into a fist and tapping Sunae on the chest. "You're making a big claim. Make sure you win!"

"Yes, I shall."

Once our conversation with the king is done, our group splits up. Tahlan, Douve, and Heki are going to explain the situation to the other claimants, while Sunae and I are going to visit her mom, Queen Sukreen. I suppose there's still a faint hope that we can convince her to give up on her plans.

Still, we understand that's a forlorn hope the moment we step into her room.

"Let me be blunt, Sunae. I need you to convince Tahlan to become king."

Before us is a regal woman, smiling confidently and stretched out on a lavish carpet: Magyan Sukreen, the kingdom's First Consort, and the most powerful woman with the Royal Presence in the kingdom. She has a cute name, and I'm sure when she was younger she was appropriately pretty, but she's a mother of two now, and there's not much of the delicate flower she might have once been left.

"I'm afraid I cannot, mother. I don't believe my brother should be king."

She's a beautiful woman, but her expression is extremely scary. She looks just like Sunae when she's angry.

"Tread carefully, Sunae. Do you think you can marry that man if you disobey me?"

"What are you saying?"

"Do you truly wish to have this man fight Magyan Khan?" Sukreen asks with a confident smirk. It's the expression of someone who feels that she has an unshakable advantage.

So, she thinks I'm weak. Honestly, not much to do about that; after all, none of the aces actually look particularly powerful. At least, Sansui and

Shouzo don't, and neither do I, especially with those scars on my face that Sunae gave me.

"Are you sure you want a man you're so smitten with to fight the king? His Majesty will soon be fully recovered. The combination of the healing Arts and the legendary fruits Tahlan has brought back will see to that."

She is clearly not yet aware that the king is already fully recovered. Not that she'd have any way of knowing, of course, since we're hiding his recovery. There's something almost pathetic about this woman. All her efforts are so meaningless. Still, because of her scary expression, I find myself shrinking back from her, which actually helps our little act. I suppose you never know how things might work to your advantage.

Meanwhile, Sunae remains silent.

"Daughter, I have no expectations of you. You can live out your life with the man you love in a distant land, so long as you do all you can to convince Tahlan to take the throne. Cling to him and weep, if you must. No doubt that'd be effective, given his personality."

"How far you've fallen… If you wish to persuade Tahlan so badly, why not go to him yourself?"

"I intend to do so, of course. I intend to do everything in my power to help the effort. That's what it means to devote oneself entirely to accomplishing a goal. It's what a predator must do to catch their prey." Her eyes are those of a hungry beast. "That's what it means to hunt, yes?"

"Mother… You're right, of course. However, that's what a predator does when hunting its prey. That is to say, only during a hunt. It's not the right analogy for a king fighting a powerful opponent."

Sunae is completely unfazed by her mother's words, and it's that lack of emotion which is probably what sets her mom off.

"What are you trying to say?"

"Mother, you're the most powerful woman in this kingdom. You have the foremost position and the strength to maintain it. You're father's most important woman. As your daughter, I admire that about you."

I'm sure Sunae actually does admire her mother, but that's also exactly why she wants to stop her.

"I'm sure there are plenty of our people who will be disappointed that Tahlan is marrying into a family in a distant land. However, given the amount of treasure and the size of the delegation they sent on this journey, there won't be many who think they'll treat him poorly because he's a foreigner. If Tahlan marries into the Arcana Kingdom, the only cost will be the disappointment of some of our people."

"You're willing to accept that as inevitable?"

"If Tahlan declares an intention to take the throne, then I'm sure at least half of the kingdom will rise up in support. This is my objective view, putting aside my feelings for him as his sister. However, the other half of the kingdom will vehemently disagree with his actions. Those who believe that the strongest man should be king will fight back with a vengeance.

Such a course of action will lead to war, and that must be avoided at all costs."

That's something even I can understand.

"If Tahlan marries into the Arcana Kingdom, many citizens will be disappointed."

"If Tahlan becomes king of Magyan, there will be a civil war."

"Therefore, Tahlan should marry into Arcana."

That's basically what Sunae said to her own mother, in the form of a fairly blunt critique. Making Tahlan king of Magyan is driven by her mom's own selfish desires, in Sunae's view, and she's essentially telling Sukreen not to split the kingdom in half just for that.

"Sunae... You are quite impertinent."

"Mother, do you truly understand what you're proposing? At this rate, you'll be fighting not just Brother Heki, but all of the other claimants. It could very well wipe out the royal family."

"You think I wouldn't take steps to prevent that?"

"Then what are your intentions behind gathering the princesses of the neighboring kingdoms who pine after Tahlan? There's always a cost to outside assistance. Do you intend to carve up the kingdom and hand it over to them, piece by piece, in return for their aid?"

Sunae's mom is clearly irritated by this rejoinder.

"Mother... I don't say that my brother doesn't have the character to be a king. However, the blood that will be spilled to make him king won't be unspilled if he takes the throne. Further, you're the king's consort, not the king. You don't have a right to dispute his choice of successor. It would be different if you were queen regnant, after defeating father. But...given that you've never challenged him, that you've accepted the role of king's consort, you have no right to play at being king..."

Tahlan gave me a rough overview of how royal succession works in Magyan. To start with, it's necessary for someone to have the Royal Presence to have a claim on the throne, at which point they can challenge the sitting king to a public duel. If they win the duel, then everyone will accept them as the new king.

In that sense, Sunae's mom also had the right to challenge for the throne, but she has already given up on that option, and Sunae is quick to point that out.

"Considering that you fled the kingdom rather than pursue your own claim to the throne, you have no room to talk."

"Mother, Tahlan has never even had a claim to the throne."

"So you're saying...that it's my...it's my fault because Tahlan wasn't born with the Royal Presence?!"

Sukreen isn't just angry now, she's also clearly feeling guilty. I can understand where she's coming from, given how much she loves Tahlan, albeit in her own particular way.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. At the very least, Tahlan left the kingdom knowing you would be saddened at his departure. Why can’t you see that as a sign of Tahlan’s own conviction?”

“I know. I’m his mother. Of course I know,” Sunae’s mom replies, speaking of Tahlan with a loving expression. “He’s a gentle child. He left the kingdom so that there wouldn’t be any unnecessary conflict based on his presence.”

She refuses to consider any other possibility, because she probably doesn’t have the imagination to do so. I doubt she’d believe me if I told her that Tahlan left the kingdom for his own, personal reasons. Personally, I understand why Tahlan did what he did. Sukreen’s love is suffocating.

“Mother… Why are you trying to make him king even though you know he doesn’t want it? What you propose is the very definition of unnecessary conflict!”

“He should be king. He’s the child of the first consort, and the eldest son of the king. More than anything…he’s such a perfect man. No one is more suited to be king than him. If he can’t become king, then it’s the kingdom’s traditions that are wrong, not him,” Sukreen says as she slowly raises her hand.

“Sunae’s love…let me teach you something. Those with the Royal Presence have very large bedrooms. That’s because they transform into giant beasts to gnaw at and play with one another… As such, this room is large enough for those with the Royal Presence to fight with all of their strength.”

Sunae’s mom quirks her finger on her raised hand. It’s an obvious sign to one of her followers to act. There’s a brief pause.

“Eh?”

Sukreen seems surprised that nothing is happening. Meanwhile, Sunae looks at me with a faintly surprised expression. Yes, it’s my doing. The person Sukreen gestured to just now is already unconscious.

“This palace is a place where those with the Royal Presence can fight without hesitation, even the bedrooms, yes…? How intimidating… Of course, that’s only if they’re able to show their strength.”

My precognitive abilities let me see where my opponents are hiding. All I need to do after that is direct the power of the Drunken Fist Style against them.

“What have you done?”

“Nothing too terribly impressive. The people who were hiding are fine, just out cold.”

They might have been able to resist if they’d activated their Spirit Summoning. Unfortunately for them, given that they were lying quietly in wait, it was easy enough to neutralize them with the Drunken Fist.

“I see… So you do possess a strange Art. Sunae, you’ll regret this…”

“If you truly believe that, then you should act more confidently, mother.”

We exit the room, leaving Sunae's mom with a sour expression. Honestly, I didn't want to mess up her mom's room, and I'm not particularly good with the Drunken Fist Style, so I don't mind letting them know I can use it. That was probably the most peaceful way of dealing with that situation.

"Saiga... What do you think?"

"That was graceless of her... Honestly, it's not a good feeling."

"No, that's not it. It seems...that mother has something up her sleeve."

Hearing those words, I look at Sunae. Her expression isn't one of confidence born from showing her mom a bit of my strength... No, it's a look of worry, as though she has some deeper suspicions.

"No, there's definitely something afoot. We need to discuss this with someone."

Part 10 — Calculations

“So that’s how it went.”

“I see. Yes, there’s something odd there.”

We’ve gathered to discuss our encounter with Sukreen. In the room are the seven of us who are going to fight—that is, the five warriors from Tempera Village, Sansui, and myself, along with Sunae and Tahlan. It’s almost time for the welcome party, but since Sunae can’t shake the feeling that something is up, we’ve gathered first to discuss what’s happening.

“Mother seems to believe that the forces at her disposal can defeat Brother Heki and the others.”

“It would be one thing if she intended to fight herself, but to place that much trust in princesses from other kingdoms… That’s definitely strange. It’s not like her.”

I don’t know what’s strange about that. Since this was the first time I’d ever met Sukreen, I don’t have a clue what they’re talking about. Just as I’m thinking that, Sansui lets out a noise that suggests he’s figured it out.

“Ah, I see…”

“Keep it to yourself, Sansui. Suiboku has already told you that you tend to give the answers out too quickly, hasn’t he?”

Eckesachs, who had been on my back, turns into her human form and cuts Sansui off before he can explain. Eckesachs has stayed out of any discussions of politics up until this point, but I guess she seems to think this is related to fighting. She regards me with a stern expression.

“Listen, my master. There are two things that you’re sorely lacking: observation skills and an imagination. Recall that when you fought Fukei, you misjudged the situation and needed to be saved by Suiboku.”

It’s true that, when we were fighting Fukei, Tahlan almost died and there was nothing I could do about it. Even though I knew Fukei could use Flash Step, it completely slipped my mind at that point.

“You’ve been told to train your ability to make snap judgments in battle, yes? To learn how to read your opponent and make a habit of using your head?”

Sigh… I’m getting stronger, but no one ever praises me for that… Everyone keeps pointing out all my flaws, instead. I mean, I know that I have enough shortcomings that it’s necessary, but still…

“A-Ahm, could it be, well…”

One of the Tempera Village girls raises her hand, trembling a bit in fear. In fact, all four of Ran’s friends seem afraid of something.

“Does it mean…that they also have people like the aces…?”

Oh, right, I hadn’t even considered that possibility. If they have someone like that, then I can understand why Sukreen is so certain that she can win.

“No, that’s not it.”

“Leave it at that,” Tahlan says shortly.

I don’t know why he can be so certain, and Eckesachs notices my lack of understanding, so she stops the conversation until I can catch up. Still, why is Tahlan so sure?

“I suppose there’s no choice. We can’t just sit in silence. My master, you need to spend time training your head.”

“Let us continue… The lack of fear is the reason. If Mother had an ace on her side, she wouldn’t underestimate Saiga like she has. She would react like you, with worry and fear. She wouldn’t ever make the mistake of underestimating someone unknown.”

That’s true… I figured it was natural for Sukreen to underestimate me, since I don’t look all that strong, but that’s just a surface judgment based on preconceptions. Since she’s underestimating me, that probably means there’s no one around her like me or Sansui, who has been given powers by God.

“Besides, the people who are going to show their strength in public are all women who want to marry me. It’s because they’ll fight with their own hands that they’ll be justified when they defeat my younger siblings. Having an ace might be useful against outsiders like us, but it wouldn’t have any meaning in the actual succession conflict.”

“Which is why an ace would be a useful hand to play to intimidate Saiga and Sunae, but she used someone with the Royal Presence instead. Given that, mother’s hand will inevitably come up short.”

“I see…”

The girls from Tempera Village nod in understanding at the explanation, and so do I.

“Then could it be that they have an Immortal like Fukei…?” another one of the Tempera girls pipes up. Everyone’s offering opinions, but I can’t think of anything to say. The pointed stares from Eckesachs and Sansui sting…

“No, that’s not it either. My mother went to the trouble of confirming the treasures that I brought in. Setting aside for a moment any concerns about whether they’re real or not, our manifest lists the noble treasures and the Coiled Peaches, so it’s easy enough to understand that we have an Immortal in our retinue. However, she’s not worried about that at all. That means she doesn’t have one at her side.”

Immortals are the one thing stronger than us aces. If there was one helping the enemy, then even Sansui might not be able to win. However, that seems not to be the case either.

“Then…maybe they have something like the Eight Sacred Treasures?” asks yet another one of the Tempera girls.

Wait, how are they able to come up with these ideas so quickly?

“That’s probably not it, either. Currently, all of the Eight Sacred Treasures are held by Domino and Arcana. Further, there are no other items equal to us in this world.”

Now that I think about it, it means that Arcana has a monopoly on all the super-rare items in this world. That's ridiculous when you stop to think about it.

"Lord Saiga."

"Errm. I know…"

I shrink back a bit at Sansui's gaze, which effortlessly conveys that I should be able to figure this out. Sukreen doesn't have someone with powers given to them by God, nor any Immortals. Furthermore, she doesn't have any amazing weapons like Eckesachs. However, she still thinks she has a good chance of winning.

Princesses from the neighboring kingdoms have gathered here in Magyan and are about to fight the princes and princesses of this kingdom. They can't use body doubles, and full-power Spirit Summoning doesn't allow the wielder to use weapons. Which means…

"Doping?"

"That's half correct, Lord Saiga."

Hey, I'm at least half right. I'm a little happy about the praise, but on second thought, maybe it's not actually much of a compliment.

"Eckesachs, this is only a suspicion, but is there a Rare Art that can strengthen others?"

"Yes, there is. It's based on a power known as the Boost Aura, and the wielders are the Consecrated Maidens."

Oh, so the answer is a lot more ordinary than I thought it would be. There's an unknown Rare Art, and Sunae's mom has somehow secured users of that Art. It's doping using support magic instead of items like the Golden Balm or Coiled Peach. That does fit with everything we know about the situation.

"When I was traveling with Suiboku, there weren't any users of that Art in this region. However, it's been two thousand years since then, so it's hardly strange for such wielders to have established a presence in this region."

"Um, what's the Art like?"

"It's an Art that those of you from Tempera Village should be familiar with: the Marionette Style using the Linked Blood," Eckesachs casually tells the Tempera girls.

At that, all of them, including Ran, react with shock.

"Wait, Marionette Style can strengthen others?!"

"I thought it was a style that you use to disrupt someone else's movements!"

"I didn't know that the Linked Blood could do such a thing…"

"I never would have imagined that it had that sort of use…"

Huh, so in Tempera Village, even support Arts have been used as the basis for a martial arts style? This world is so strange.

"Don't be ludicrous. Even Suiboku was surprised when he saw it for the first time, because he never thought of using it that way. It's Tempera

Village that's odd, not the standard use of the Linked Blood," Eckesachs says with exasperation. It's true, it's odd to think of using a power used to support others being developed as a martial art.

"The Aura of Aiding is a power that allows one to strengthen people far away from the wielder. The Marionette Style used that ability to focus on a single part of an opponent and disrupt their movements, but…the primary use of the power is to support other fighters. In the Old World, the wielders were known as dragon fodder."

Um, there's a word in there that's caught my attention, but…

"Don't underestimate it because it just provides strength to another. A wielder of the Rapid Iron Style with the support of a Consecrated Maiden was able to tear off one of Suiboku's arms even though he was wielding me at the time. Users of the Rapid Iron Style are especially suited for combat, of course, even Suiboku was caught completely off guard by that… He still won, of course."

Ran looks happy, but the color has drained from the faces of the other four. Well, yeah. I don't even want to think about a fight so intense that Master Suiboku lost an arm.

"Ah, yes, that's right. Rapid Iron Style uses the Aura of Strength, and is known as the Moving Wheels Style of the Fang-Blooded in Tempera Village. No doubt you've heard of it? Of course, they use their powers rather differently."

Honestly, Master Suiboku is basically an embodiment of all the circumstantial cheats that main characters get in a novel. Even when he wasn't as ridiculously strong as he is now, he just kept winning.

"Um… Are you sure we'll be okay?! Spirit Summoning is already super strong!"

"Are you sure we can win…? If people who can become giant animals become even stronger…?"

"Aura of Aiding… Linked Blood… So there are different ways to use it…"

"Ran, Saiga, and Sansui are one thing… But are you sure we can win?"

The four Tempera girls look really worried. True, Spirit Summoners are already super strong. If they're given buffs by someone, Sansui and I would be fine, but I think even Ran might have trouble against them.

"Worry not. Your ancestors are the ones who surprised Suiboku with their abilities, after all, and they were such skilled fighters that they made him regret wiping out your people. You're their descendants. Have faith in your skills."

Pretty sure the fact that their village *was* wiped out is what makes it hard to have faith in those skills…

"Ordinarily, you wouldn't be able to defeat those with the Royal Presence, but you now have the noble treasures that Suiboku gave you. More than anything, you have me. If they're only prepared to fight Shadow Summoners and Marked, then it's a simple matter to give you the tools to win," Eckesachs says, echoing what Sunae had said to her dad.

“Ordinarily, it’s extremely taxing for someone with the Royal Presence to fight as a giant beast if they’re not blessed with overwhelming amounts of power like Ran. Yet, despite that, the royals consider fighting as beasts to be their basic method of fighting. In which case, there’s no way we can lose. Aid from a Consecrated Maiden is nothing,” Eckesachs declares confidently from her sword form.

“Secure your victory and make sure you win!”

That, too, is a teaching from Master Suiboku.

Part 11 — Intentions

The Magyan Kingdom and its surrounding kingdoms were connected by blood ties that went back to the very dawn of their dynasties. There were rare examples of commoners born with the Royal Presence killing the king and taking the throne, but since they usually took relatives of the slain king as consorts, even when a dynasty fell, the bloodline often continued.

But just as it was in Caputo, the bloodlines only meant the chance of children being born with a particular talent was greater, rather than guaranteed. There were times when a consort would give birth to three children and all three of them would have the Royal Presence, and also times when they would give birth to five children and none of them would have the desired talent.

Further, it was common for those with the Royal Presence to fall in battle when contesting the throne. That was why rulers had many offspring, and also why the numbers would mostly even out over time.

Now, by the traditional qualifications for kingship in this region, Tahlan had been born a dud. Instead, he was found at a young age to have a talent for Shadow Summoning, an Art that was practiced in the Magyan Kingdom. It was a stroke of luck for the prince, as he could have been born with an innate talent that had no practitioners in the kingdom, such as Holy Power or Curse Power.

Although he was relatively fortunate, Tahlan was still a failure by the standards of the royal family. He had no claim to the throne, and he was fated to never be able to match those with the Royal Presence in terms of strength.

Though he lacked a claim, Tahlan was still raised with the care and love befitting the eldest son of the king. After all, in the Magyan Kingdom, the chance of a royal child having the Royal Presence was roughly fifty percent. There were many children like Heki and Sunae with the Royal Presence born after Tahlan, but at the same time, Tahlan also had many younger siblings who didn’t even have the Shadow Presence.

It was disappointing, but there was nothing to be done about it. Given that the probability of being born with the Royal Presence was only fifty percent, no one mocked Tahlan as a failure or a waste of energy.

Ordinarily, that would have been the end of Tahlan’s story. Like any other prince without the Royal Presence, he would have married the daughter or younger sister of an important retainer and he would have been expected to support one of his siblings when they rose to the throne. While it wouldn’t have been kingship, his future had been, relatively speaking, bright, with plenty of opportunities for him to find happiness.

However, fate was fickle. Whatever Tahlan lacked in terms of the Royal Presence, it was more than made up with other gifts. He was the object of passionate yearning from the noblewomen of his kingdom, and even the

foreign princesses who occasionally visited the kingdom found themselves drawn to him.

First among his gifts was his face. Taking after his mother, Tahlan had extremely handsome features. Furthermore, the expressions that graced that handsome visage were charming. Though he lacked the Royal Presence, his face still exuded confidence, without a trace of self-loathing or self-pity, conveying a sweet charm that hooked his admirers.

He was also blessed with a good physique. Like his father, he was tall, and because he had dedicated himself to practicing both his Shadow Summoning and his swordsmanship, he was also well-built.

With such a handsome and rugged specimen of a man welcoming them to the palace, dressed in all the splendid finery of his station, everyone who met him was struck dumb upon first meeting him. Moreover, his ability to converse and entertain his guests made certain that he lived up to that remarkable first impression. He was refined and elegant in his manner, and he was always careful to be thoughtful for his guests in a way that women desired.

He was well educated, an excellent host, and just by speaking he could satisfy the women who were his guests. It would have been impossible for any female guest to have a bad impression of the man.

Further, not every woman with the Royal Presence wanted to go through the effort of pushing aside their siblings to claim their kingdom's throne. It was perfectly natural that the princesses of the neighboring kingdoms, most of whom had given up taking the throne themselves, began dreaming of marrying Tahlan.

Sukreen found herself satisfied that her son was the target of admiration by the women who surrounded him. After all, it meant that the princesses of the neighboring kingdoms were fighting over *her* son. As a mother, that gave her a smug sense of superiority, as both people from within the Magyan Kingdom and from outside flattered her excessively to get into her son's good graces. The heady days of people trying to court Tahlan were happy days for Sukreen.

However, even that delightful period lost its luster after a while. It was understandable that Sukreen would ponder the inconceivable after seeing the gifts from neighboring princesses pile up at her son's door. The inconceivable—that her son, despite having no Royal Presence, might become king.

While her second child, Sunae, was born with the Royal Presence, she wasn't particularly gifted, and she doubted that her daughter had the necessary killer instinct to defeat her siblings and claim the throne. Sunae had done nothing wrong; she simply hadn't been born with enough talent.

One day, Sukreen decided to pose the question to one of the princesses that had brought her gifts.

"What would you do if I said I intend to make Tahlan king?"

She meant it as a jest, as Sukreen wasn't yet serious about making Tahlan king. However, it was clear from her expression that the princess found the idea appealing. That was true of the second, third, and fourth princesses she spoke to about the possibility of placing Tahlan on the throne. All of the women, smitten with Tahlan, felt that it would be a wonderful thing to make him king.

As she gained more supporters for her idea, Sukreen began to take the idea more seriously, working on the details of making the impossible possible. Since everyone was in agreement with her idea, it must have been a good one. Given that the people of the kingdom also supported Tahlan, there was nothing to dissuade the queen from her conviction.

That was why even Tahlan himself wouldn't be allowed to choose an alternative, especially one like leaving the kingdom and finding happiness with a foreign woman in a far-off land.

"Bahahaha…" Magyan Khan laughed awkwardly as he appeared at the reception.

An observer would swear they saw a predatory glint in his eye, and everyone noticed that his gaze was not upon his newly returned son and daughter, or their partners, but rather upon the food laid out before him. However, a glare from Heki, who was supporting him, forced the great Khan to settle in his seat and turn to those assembled in the feasting hall.

In Magyan, guests were seated atop round cushions woven from straw, while a giant rug was laid out on the ground in front of them with countless large plates of food atop it. Everyone was expected to take their portions from those plates by hand and eat them from their own small serving plates.

Of course, all of the dishes were made to be eaten by hand. For example, meat was served wrapped up in leaves to avoid getting grease upon the diner's fingers, or otherwise served upon thin flatbread.

"This is an auspicious day. My son, who had left for far distant lands, has returned with a bride and great treasure. Further, my fool of a daughter, who left without permission, has also returned. A fine, auspicious day indeed," Magyan Khan said while raising a colored glass goblet. He eyed the wine within it longingly, but no one seemed to pay that glance any mind. "It's only natural that I'd beat back my illness, eh?"

"Yes, glad to see you're doing better, O father. So behave yourself until you're fully recovered," retorted Heki, who had been serving as Khan's regent during his illness.

"Y-Yeah, of course…"

Khan raised his glass in a toast.

"Let us feast. Tonight, we'll empty our wine cellar and consume all of our livestock!"

The Magyan king gulped down the wine, as though he had been desperately longing to taste it and with such gusto that no one who saw it

could think of him as an invalid. He seemed fully recovered to everyone present, even though he was still ill. The moment Khan drained his goblet, Heki snatched it away and handed it off to one of the serving staff.

“Hey, well, you know, Heki…”

“Yeah, I know, old man. The smell of meat makes you nauseous, yeah? No doubt you can’t even think of eating any. You should stick to the gruel with the medicinal herbs in it. I’m sure it’ll make you feel better, yeah?”

Heki forced his father to sit, placing a firm emphasis on his words as he set the bowl of gruel in front of him. The green concoction smelled faintly of medicine and looked extremely unappetizing, so of course there was a great heaping wooden bowl in front of Khan. Perhaps because he was still ill, the king had trouble starting into the bowl. Evidently losing his patience, Heki called over a lady-in-waiting.

“Hey, old man… You’re still the king of this country. It’s the duty of the king to be strong for his people, yeah?”

“Y-Yep…” the king sighed.

As the lady-in-waiting fed him, Khan let out a sigh. Set out in front of him was a lavish feast, and his guests and family were all digging in. He was the only one who wasn’t allowed to partake, and he cursed his illness with all of his heart.

“Sunae, welcome back!”

“So what did you think of the world outside of Magyan?”

“What’s with this weakling? Do you really intend to marry him?!”

Still, Khan was the only one who was focused on the food. The others were all celebrating Sunae and Tahlan’s return. Sunae’s half sisters, in particular, had swarmed around Sunae and her foreign fiancé, teasing them with a glass of wine in one hand.

It was a joyous occasion for them. Sunae marrying outside of the kingdom meant she was giving up her claim to the throne. Unlike with Tahlan, there were no complications to her engagement, and everyone felt free to tease her.

“Hahaha… Um, I’m in a committed relationship with Miss Sunae.”

“Can’t you say anything else, you fool?”

However, Saiga was having a hard time coping with the teasing. Douve and Tahlan had been the subject of all of the attention to this point, and he wasn’t prepared to have the spotlight thrust upon him.

“My, my. Are you sure you want to marry such a weak-looking man?”

“You were out of the kingdom, anyway. You should have dealt with it by sending father a letter.”

“I mean, why not just elope? There’s no way the king will ever let you marry without testing your fiancé.”

While Sunae’s half sisters teased her for her bad taste in men, they also expressed sincere concern about Saiga’s well-being. They were all worried that their father was going to kill him when he got around to testing him.

“Hahaha! You’re all underestimating Saiga!”

It was probably intentional, but Tahlan, sitting next to the king, was carrying himself differently from usual. He had his arm around Douve's hip as she sat next to him, as though laying claim to her as his personal property, a thoroughly protective act. It wasn't the most dignified behavior, to be sure.

Douve wore a pleased smile, while also looking tauntingly at a group gathered a short distance away from her. On the receiving end of her gaze were the princesses Sukreen had invited to the kingdom. Like she had until now, Douve was monopolizing Tahlan's affection while gleefully accumulating resentful gazes from his admirers.

"He looks young, and even I can't pretend he's steely in his demeanor. The truth is, he lacks experience. However, he's also a man who Sunae was willing to introduce to father. That alone should tell you everything."

Yes, there was obvious tension in the room despite the festivities. Had Tahlan been a different, lesser man when he'd returned, the princesses could have given up, convinced that they'd allowed their infatuation to cloud their judgment. However, the man who had returned was the same Tahlan they had pined after for years, the man who was such an epitome of a man and prince that even men loved him. If anything, he had grown *more* charming since they had last seen him.

Unfortunately for them, he was far away. Physically, that is; they were seated far away from him. After all, Tahlan was the eldest of the king's children and he was, in a sense, the guest of honor. It was natural that he be seated next to his father, the king, and it was also natural for his fiancée, Douve, to be seated next to him. Meanwhile, the princesses who had gathered at the news of Tahlan's return weren't allowed to sit anywhere near the royal personage.

"He who knows most, speaks least. Of course Saiga, the man who is to be my brother, isn't speaking because he's simply not aware of how much he knows. Or perhaps because he knows so many who know more than him," Tahlan said, his lips quirked in a troubled smile. The feelings that had prompted him to travel abroad, the people he had met on that journey, the fact that he had brought those people home with him…all of these things swirled about in his heart.

"My siblings, the world is quite large and filled with powerful opponents who we could have never imagined here in our homeland. In particular, the Arcana Kingdom was full of remarkable discoveries. I saw battles there I wouldn't even have dreamt of seeing elsewhere."

Tahlan had witnessed, without exaggeration, a battle that was a literal clash of natural disasters, yet he also recalled those events with a cheerful smile. Uncharacteristically, he took another long pull of his drink, and with his cheeks flushed from the wine, he regaled his listeners with his stories. He smiled with the realization that none of his listeners were likely to believe the tales he had brought back from the country he intended to settle in.

“There’s nothing for you to worry about in a clash between father and Saiga. He may not look it, but Saiga is one of the strongest men in the Arcana Kingdom. All of you combined couldn’t beat him.”

There was a certain elegance to Tahlan. Even as he carried himself in a way that in anyone else would have seemed crude and boorish, the Magyan prince made it seem elegant. Although he was drunk, it was as the drunkenness of a skilled actor, and he presented himself without any of the sloppiness or embarrassment that another might show under the same circumstances. To put it quite simply, he was a man that made even the ordinary seem extraordinary.

“Father, it would be best if you don’t direct your fangs against him until you’re fully recovered from your illness. He’s an opponent who will pose a serious challenge even at your best!”

“I see… So even you’re saying that…”

Magyan was a kingdom of warriors, but that didn’t mean that those present were fools. Everyone had realized that Tahlan was acting out a role, trying to establish the subject of his choosing. That said, both the Arcanians and the locals couldn’t hide their surprise at his behavior. They knew his words were rehearsed, but they still sounded natural and graceful. There wasn’t any trace of scheming to be heard in his tone, just cheerful nostalgia and a trace of boasting.

“So, he’s not the kingdom’s greatest? I’m the greatest warrior in Magyan, O son of mine.”

“The Arcana Kingdom boasts five men with peerless fighting ability. I freely admit that Saiga has remarkable talents, talents that would be ordinarily unmatched, but there are four other men in the Arcana Kingdom with comparable skills. I do not hesitate to describe him as one of their greatest warriors.”

“Oh?”

“Still, in Magyan, if one wishes to prove one’s mettle… Ah, no. Douve, my love, can you tell me the words you’ve used before?”

With that, Tahlan turned to the woman he had draped his arm over, uttering the words into her ears as though pleading with her.

“House Sepaeda is a martial house. If asked to show our mettle, we will demonstrate it.”

“Yes. Those words apply to Magyan as well. A fine boast made over drinks, but no doubt it’d be better proven in battle! My brother, Saiga, you’re not of House Sepaeda, but…”

Tahlan turned the conversation over to Saiga, who sat a distance away. Saiga nodded, having steeled himself.

“I’m House Batterabbe’s ace, Saiga Mizu. Batterabbe is a martial house equal to House Sepaeda. If challenged, I will meet that challenge!”

“Indeed! But, my brother, it would be you who would be issuing the challenge here to our father, not the other way around. Phrase your words with more care!”

“M-My apologies! Your Majesty, Magyan Khan! I challenge you to win your daughter’s hand in marriage!”

Tahlan laughed and turned to Sunae, who was sitting next to Saiga.

“Which reminds me, Sunae. You brought not just Saiga, but several other warriors with you, yes? They’re all young, beautiful women, yes?”

“Yes, they are my retainers, who I defeated and brought into my service.”

“Mm. They were still difficult challenges for you, a Spirit Summoner... Had it been before I met Douve, I may have been tempted by them! Ah! Don’t be so cross with me, my beloved! It’s merely a jest brought about by the wine!”

Tahlan was playing the part of the fool, acting like the kind of embarrassing man who praised other women in his beloved’s presence and hastily apologized after being pinched. Yet, even then, he still exuded a masculine allure.

“Your Highness... Please don’t lean so heavily upon me in public. We’d decided to only do those things in private, mm?”

“My apologies... But father approves so heartily of you. That makes me so happy...”

“Which reminds me. My father made you go through all sorts of hoops to win my hand in marriage, didn’t he...?”

“I was only showing the necessary dedication of a man asking another for his daughter’s hand... It was a small price to pay to show you off to the people of my homeland.”

Tahlan and Douve were playing a part: a couple that was cringingly in love. Yet, even so, Tahlan remained the ideal prince. The men couldn’t help but laugh, while the women could only stew in their envy.

Meanwhile, Douve was showing off his affection for her. As all those women glared at her, Douve derisively mocked them with just her eyes. She was the epitome of the haughty, arrogant noblewoman, and her demeanor was doing nothing but pouring more fuel onto the fire.

“I’m sure my father will vanquish the illness that’s had the temerity to ail him if he sees Sunae’s retainers fight! How about a royal exhibition? There are quite a few princesses from the neighboring kingdoms present. It would sully our name not to provide them with entertainment!”

“Yeah...not a bad idea. It would be a perfect cure to their boredom... I’d like to see for myself that Sunae hasn’t just brought back some ordinary man,” Magyan Khan mused. It was almost time for the conversation to reach the desired climax.

“You’re the one who’s bored, eh, old man?”

“Heki, have mercy upon your old man. I can’t have women, I can’t drink, I can’t eat meat. All I can do is sleep. Just how am I supposed to get better with a regime like that? Without meat or wine, eh?”

“Yeah, yeah... You can eat and drink all you want once you’re better. If you’re lonely, I’ll bring a woman for you.”

“Hahahaha! I see, I see… That’s a promise.”

“Just get on with it.”

“Awright…”

Khan, sitting cross-legged upon a cushion, was about to make his formal proposal.

“All right, Sunae. Let’s see what these retainers of yours are made of. Their opponents… Mm… Heki, how about you and your siblings? You wanna prove you’ve gotten stronger, eh?”

“Yep, sounds good. It’s a good chance to show how strong us claimants to the throne are, before Sunae and Tahlan leave the kingdom!”

It was an invitation and an opportunity. Because everyone was aware of where the conversation was going, now was the time for someone to interrupt. What prompted that response more than anything was Tahlan’s final push.

“I look forward to it. I know how strong Sunae’s retainers are. If one of my siblings, brother or sister, defeats one of them in the fashion of one worthy of the throne, I’ll embrace them as capable warriors!”

“My, my, how confident…”

“I’m saying that the Arcanians are strong! A man must stand by his word! I’ll give a warm embrace to anyone who wins!”

It was clear what Tahlan intended. He wanted to make those who sought to marry him fight Sunae’s retainers and, should Sunae’s retainers win, that would prove that those who pined for him weren’t worthy of deciding the fate of the throne. The idea that Tahlan felt they were weaker than those who didn’t even have the Royal Presence was humiliating to the princesses.

“However, the basic rule of a royal exhibition is fairness… There’s no written rule to that effect, but it’s hardly fair for one side to know how the other fights, while they keep their own weapons and fighting styles a secret.”

“Why worry about such trifles? Those fighting are those who would claim the throne. A king is only a king if they can defeat all comers, whatever they may be armed with. One isn’t worthy of the throne if they can’t defeat an enemy who attacks them during a triumphal parade. In that sense… Perhaps it’s time I considered retirement.”

It was also an attractive offer. The offer of a warm embrace from Tahlan had an immense allure to the princesses. That was why Sukreen made her move.

“Your Majesty.”

“Mm, what is it, Sukreen?”

“How about having those that I’ve chosen fight in the exhibition?”

In Magyan, the king was the final authority, and the system of government was essentially an absolute monarchy. Below him in authority were the princes and princesses with a claim to the throne. Of course, the king always had the responsibility to accept any challenges, but actually

doing so was a rare event. As such, as a basic matter, those princes and princesses had quite a bit of authority.

However, that also meant that the consorts, who were of the same generation of the king, but who had declined to challenge him, had much lower standing. Sons and daughters were allowed to speak to their father almost as equals in public, but consorts were required to address the king with respect. That was, of course, all according to form.

“Those you’ve chosen, Sukreen?”

“Yes.”

“Mmm…Well, you understand what that means, right?”

Everyone already knew who Sukreen would choose. Which was why, although this entire exchange was a charade, it was necessary to get her to formally commit to it.

“I won’t forgive any half-assed fighters who appear in my presence.”

“Yes, it won’t be a problem.”

“And, of course, it’s fine if they die?”

“I shall make certain they’re aware of the risk.”

“In a fight, they could lose. Even if they win, they might be humiliated. No hard feelings after?”

“It’s a royal exhibition for your health, Your Majesty. I won’t do anything to irritate you.”

First, the participants had to be strong. Next, they had to be prepared to die. More than anything, they weren’t allowed to win while humiliating themselves. Whatever was the case with warriors from other kingdoms, this region’s Spirit Summoners had to be dedicated to those fundamental principles. Having confirmed this, the king showed his character in nodding his assent.

“Then I welcome your choices. You have a wide range of acquaintances abroad, yeah? Call upon whoever you wish, whether from Donzila or Baigo. That is, if you can call on them before I recover.”

Sukreen had borne him two children, and so the king showed her a certain amount of respect. As such, he gave her permission to summon her warriors from abroad.

“In terms of numbers… Let’s say teams of seven against seven, with each fighting one-on-one. We’ll make it a battle of those from the Arcana Kingdom against those with the Royal Presence. How’s that, silent warriors of House Sepaeda and House Batterabbe?”

“Of course. House Sepaeda will field a warrior.”

“O-Of course! House Batterabbe’s also a martial house!”

“Good, good. That makes things interesting! Heki, tell the people that there will be a royal exhibition with all here bearing witness to the terms,” King Khan said, pouring wine into the bowl that had held his gruel. He held it up to drink it with a certain amount of anticipation.

“Yep, got it. I’ll make sure it’s done, so get some rest,” Heki said, snatching the bowl away and gulping it down.

And so, there would be a festival. It was something that was decided in an apparently festive moment, but it was far from a display of goodwill. Instead, it would be a farce that involved all sorts of competing interests.

Part 12 — Eve

Royal Exhibition Before His Majesty, Magyan Khan.

His Majesty will be holding a royal exhibition to celebrate the return of Prince Tahlan and Princess Sunae.

Location: Royal Arena

Item 1: Duels will be conducted between the elite of the Arcana Kingdom and Spirit Summoners.

Item 2: All investigations into the fighting styles of the Arcanian warriors are prohibited.

Item 3: Those with the Royal Presence are prohibited from using weapons, while all weapons are permitted for those without the Royal Presence.

Item 4: The Spirit Summoners will be chosen by Magyan Sukreen, the first consort.

Item 5: Participants must be powerful warriors.

Item 6: Participants must not fear death.

Item 7: Only honorable victories will be recognized.

Item 8: Magyan Sukreen may choose her participants from outside of the Magyan Kingdom.

Item 9: Magyan Sukreen must gather her warriors before His Majesty the King is fully recovered from his illness.

Item 10: The Arcanian warriors will come from both House Sepaeda and House Batterabbe.

Item 11: The format will be a series of one-on-one duels in a best-of-seven format.

Magyan Sukreen’s Chosen Warriors

First Warrior: Siyanchi Envee

Second Warrior: Siyanchi Kesri

Third Warrior: Donzila Gayaou

Fourth Warrior: Deyiaoe Hinse

Fifth Warrior: Deyiaoe Utto

Sixth Warrior: Magyan Toris

Seventh Warrior: Baigo Shiyoki

The Arcana Kingdom’s Chosen Warriors

First Warrior: Magyan Sunae’s retainer, Yabia of the Four Vessels Style

Second Warrior: Magyan Sunae’s retainer, Suji of the Bursting Venom Style

Third Warrior: Magyan Sunae’s retainer, Kazuno of the Drunken Fist Style

Fourth Warrior: Magyan Sunae’s retainer, Konoko of the Mist Shadow Style

Fifth Warrior: Magyan Sunae’s retainer, Ran of the Silver Demon Style

Sixth Warrior: Magyan Sunae’s betrothed, Saiga Mizu

Seventh Warrior: Douve Sepaeda’s retainer, Sansui Shirokuro

And so, the royal exhibition has come to be, with me participating as the seventh fighter. Ideally, we’ll win all seven matches, and by achieving complete victory, we’ll be able to crush the ambitions of those trying to raise Tahlan to the throne. If we fail, it could end up causing a civil war. Given that, there’s more meaning to these duels than any accomplishments we could achieve in an actual war.

“Sansui, the reason you’re placed last is because you’re the only House Sepaeda retainer here. If Blois was here, I might have had her fight first.”

“I’m certain Blois would have won.”

Currently, Lady Douve and I are strolling through the palace. It’s nighttime, but it’s still warm and comfortable. Lady Douve is wearing the thin, veiled dress worn by high-class people in this kingdom, and the look suits her well. Those around us who notice Lady Douve’s approach look around worriedly and edge away. After all, many of the princesses want Lady Douve’s head. Of course the average person doesn’t want to be near her.

“Mm… Then perhaps we should have brought her along. That would have kept you from being lonely, mm?”

“You just… Look, Blois is finished with fighting. She’s completed her service, after all.”

Yes, I’m sure Blois could deal with a Spirit Summoner. She may no longer serve as a frontline bodyguard, but she’s still plenty powerful.

However, there’s no reason for her to fight anymore. She’s been allowed to retire and get married in recognition for her service to House Sepaeda, which started in her childhood. That is why, even if she could win against the opponent, even if it’s just an exhibition, she doesn’t need to fight. Blois is extremely talented with both magic and the sword, but it’s not as though she enjoys fighting. As such, this is all for the best.

“Oh, that’s right.”

“Yes.”

“Thinking about it, I’ve known you for quite a while now. I still remember when we first met… You really haven’t changed at all.”

“I’m ashamed of my inability to grow.”

Blois and Lady Douve are both a lot more mature than they were when I first met them. Of course, Lain’s the one who’s grown the most in the years I’ve served House Sepaeda, but the two of them are also completely different from the children I first met. The girls have become women. Six years is a long time. Or maybe it’s a blink of an eye.

“There was a time I thought about marrying you, but that was before I met Tahlan. You know, I really do feel the world revolves around me.”

“I agree, Lady Douve.”

Her statement is the very height of arrogance, but I can’t say I disagree. I wouldn’t be surprised if Lady Douve is the main character in someone’s novel. After all, nothing in her life has ever worked against her.

“No, I suppose you’re going to be married. I should start calling you Madam Douve, yes?”

“Yes... I suppose you won’t call me Lady Douve anymore.”

Lady Douve is arrogant, but she’s not heartless. There are times when she even revels in sentiment. She has no doubts about her happiness; whatever may happen, whether a battle or even a war, she has no doubt that the results will go in her favor.

“I’m looking forward to it... Soon, Tahlan will be my man. I’ll monopolize the prince who’s beloved by his people and pined after by countless princesses. I alone will know what he’s like in the bedroom, and I alone will bear his children.”

“I think that’s a wonderful future, my lady.”

I really do. Lady Douve’s found a really good gentleman as a match. No doubt their days will be filled with happiness and contentment for them both.

“Sansui.”

“Yes, my lady?”

“I thought I’d ask, since we have the chance... I know that in your head, you refer to my father and brother as ‘His Fathership’ and ‘His Brothership,’ yes?”

Indeed, I even slip up and say it aloud from time to time. I’m many times their age, but for some reason I still think of them as a father and older brother.

“So, what do you call me in your head?”

“I’ve always referred to you as Lady Douve, even in my thoughts.”

“True, I suppose that’s the sort of man you are. Such a dull man.”

Walking in front of me, Lady Douve murmurs to herself, not even bothering to look back in my direction. I’m sure spending time with bodyguards like Blois and I, who don’t have much in the way of conversational wit, hasn’t been all that entertaining for such a bright noblewoman. Even then, even despite that...Blois and I spent a long, long time with her.

“I have no doubt you’ll win, Sansui, and I have no doubt I’ll win in the end. With that said, what do you think? Can the other six win?”

“Ran and Saiga are powerful warriors and even I can’t easily dispatch them at this point. I’m also certain the other four will live up to your expectations.”

“Honestly... I just can’t think of Saiga as being that strong. Maybe it’s because I saw him lose to you three times running.”

Alas, poor Saiga. However, I understand her feelings. After all, he lost to me the day we met him, then lost to me a second time, then a third time. All three times basically happened in the blink of an eye, at that. He’s much stronger now, but I guess first impressions are hard to break.

“You dealt easily with Ran as well. The other four aren’t anywhere near their level, are they?”

“I’m sure my master would say all six of them are worthy warriors now.”

“True. They all received instruction from your master, didn’t they? He really was powerful… So very powerful.”

I feel Lady Douve’s presence become gloomy. Evidently she also saw my master fight at full strength, so I can understand why she’d feel that way. I’m pretty sure he’s just about the only one who can unnerve her.

“If the other six lose, you need to take responsibility, mm? It’d be a simple matter for you to fight all seven of the opponents at once, wouldn’t it? After all, you’re the sole apprentice of the great Suiboku.”

I remain silent by way of reply. To have someone who actually knows my master bring up his name puts quite a bit of pressure on me. If I lose, that hurts my master’s reputation. I’m sure my master wouldn’t care, but I would. It pains me to imagine humiliating myself in front of people who know my master.

“If it’s what you wish, Lady Douve, I’ll defeat every enemy who dares stand before you.”

“Mm… Then perhaps you can demonstrate that for me now?”

Lady Douve’s malicious aura flares up into a blaze. The people of the palace have long since disappeared. There’s a woman lurking behind me, exuding such an aura of hatred that even an amateur could detect her presence. It’s probably one of the women who was alongside Princess Gayaou when we were in Donzila.

“A woman with no claws or fangs of her own should stay silent.”

She probably isn’t participating in the exhibition, but she’s clearly ready for battle.

“My, my, there’s nothing impressive about a lonely woman issuing empty threats. It’s rather pathetic, actually.”

Impressively, Lady Douve sticks the dagger where it hurts and the woman flushes angrily.

“Damn you… Do you understand you’re about to die? Do you think help is coming just because you’re in the Magyan palace?”

“My, my, do you plan to run away with your tail between your legs if I call for help? Such a brave assassin you are. I guess if you can’t measure up to me as a woman, it makes you a lesser fighter too.”

She isn’t just pouring fuel on the fire, she’s actively committing arson. Far from being frightened, Lady Douve’s actually enjoying this situation.

“If you want to die so badly, I’ll go ahead and kill you. It just changes the plan a little bit. Die regretting that you so casually walked into your demise!”

“How scary… So scary that I feel myself tearing up.”

Lady Douve is an ordinary woman. Putting aside her twisted personality and her high birth, she’s just as she appears: an ordinary noblewoman. She can’t put up a fight against a Spirit Summoner strong enough to serve as a retainer to a princess.

In spite of this, Lady Douve continues to smile. She has iron-clad faith that she and her bodyguard will never, ever lose.

“Any last words?”

“Let me tell you something that you’ll never know for yourself. Tahlan is adorable in bed. He buries his face in my cleavage and purrs like a kitten... I really do pity you for never knowing that side of him…”

The Spirit Summoner transforms into a giant beast. Lady Douve is her target and I’m her only escort. An objective observer probably would think Lady Douve’s in a hopeless situation.

“You really are pitiful… The whining of a defeated cat.”

“Diiiiiiiiiie!”

It’s worth repeating here that we’re in the Magyan palace. That is to say, we’re in a building that’s designed for Spirit Summoners to show their true power, with high ceilings and large, open spaces.

Now, my job here is to stop the giant carnivore charging at us. Up until recently, my options under these circumstances would have been pretty limited. However, now that my master has taught me several new techniques, I have quite a few ways to deal with this rampaging beast.

“Graaaaaaaah!”

The woman lets out a blood-curdling scream that doesn’t sound human. Well, I suppose that’s natural, since she no longer is human at this point. She swings her front paw, trying to hack both Lady Douve and myself to pieces with one swipe.

I’m impressed by the sheer calm I feel coming from Lady Douve behind me. She’s so calm that there’s a part of me that wonders if she’s in active denial about the situation. She has absolute confidence in her ace. That confidence, that unshakeable conviction that I’ll do something about the threat in front of her, allows her to maintain her cool.

It’s an impressive amount of trust to place in someone, and I honestly kind of wonder if it’s not going a little too far. In any event, I activate a technique to answer that trust. I watch the beast’s paw approach and seek my opening, reaching out with my hand. The sharp blades should have been driven into the prey with the thick muscles of that front leg, rending the prey into pieces. However, the claws actually cut through nothing but air. The moment my hand touches her, she’s transported far away from us.

“Wha—?!”

The beast woman trying to kill Lady Douve is clearly confused by what has happened, so much so that you can see it on her feline features. That’s understandable; she had leapt out to attack us and, with the sharpened vision from her transformation, she shouldn’t have had any trouble keeping up with our movements. Yet, somehow, we’ve disappeared from her line of sight.

“My, my... What’s wrong? Have you had too much wine?”

Well aware of what technique I’ve used on the woman, Lady Douve calls out with a mocking smile. Yes, I’ve used one of the new techniques I learned

from my master: the Flash Step Art known as Weaver Girl. It's a technique that teleports an object I touch with a Flash Step. From someone who's just encountered it for the first time, it must look like we suddenly disappeared from our previous location. It's precisely because she has such sharp senses that she can't grasp what's actually happened.

We're in one of the palace hallways and there's nothing that marks any stretch of it as different from another. Without paying careful attention to her surroundings, there's no way for her to tell if it's her or her targets who had moved. Flash Step Arts are teleportation, not high-speed movement. It seems that this is the first time she's ever experienced anything like it. Even if she had seen it before, there's no way for a Spirit Summoner to react to it.

"Mere tricks..."

"Oh, are you afraid? Will you run away? Go ahead. Shake that large rear of yours and tuck that tail between your legs as you run. I'm a gentlewoman. I'll let you go."

It's impressive just how magnanimous Lady Douve can act, considering she hasn't actually done anything herself. I can't help but be impressed by her nerve as I reach down and draw the wooden sword from my sash.

"You don't want to be hurt, do you? If you run away now, you can avoid getting hurt. I'm sure you could marry some other man, someone other than Tahlan. Or, should I say, someone *lesser* than Tahlan... I'm sure you'll make a lovely couple with whoever that might be."

I'm not just protecting an arsonist, but a *serial* arsonist. Her talent for coming up with off-the-cuff insults is nothing short of amazing.

"Raaaaaah!"

My opponent still maintains a certain level of calm despite the verbal onslaught. Well, okay, her presence is boiling over with rage, but she doesn't attack in a straight line, instead leaping side to side at random as she approaches. She's trying to make it so that we can't grasp her precise location, displaying a remarkable amount of speed and agility for a creature her size. That said, she's nothing compared to Ran.

"Such an annoyingly noisy cat... Sansui."

"Yes, my lady."

"Make her scream. Like a little girl."

Can't she phrase that a little differently? I mean, surely there's a better way to give that order. Still, it's not a bad thing to take the initiative in this situation.

I leap forward with nothing in front of me to block my way. Seeing me, the enemy eyes me warily as she continues going after Lady Douve. Even if I was to do something, she must consider this the perfect opportunity to attack Lady Douve. It's good that she's focused on her initial target, but it's problematic to be so thoroughly underestimated.

"Got you!"

"Sadly, no."

Another Flash Step Art, Cowherd: a technique to teleport a distant opponent close to me.

Alongside that, an Inner Body Art, Leaden Step: a technique that increases the weight of either my own body or else something that I'm touching.

"Gaaaaah!"

"I'm afraid I'm the one who has you."

I thrust straight down as I descend upon her from above. The blow lands on her undefended back, right into a pressure point. It's more than enough to defeat the princess, even while she's using Spirit Summoning. The increased force that comes from the Leaden Step, used in conjunction with an attack designed to reduce the stress upon my hand, easily lays her out.

Having been teleported beneath me in mid-lunge, she lays sprawled on the ground and returns to human form. I release my Leaden Step and put my wooden sword back in my sash, landing on the ground.

"Guh…!"

"Yes, go ahead and cry. You're much cuter this way."

Evidently determining that the woman no longer posed a threat, Lady Douve approaches on foot. She doesn't show a shred of fear, even though the woman is essentially a wounded beast.

"D-Damn you…!"

"I know you're trying to hide it with your anger, but you're actually sad, aren't you? Sad that the man you fell in love with didn't pay even attention to you. That another woman stole his heart."

"Shut up…!"

"What happened to your precious claws and fangs? Come now, this is hardly the time to be scratching your nails on the floor, is it? Aren't you supposed to be tearing me to pieces?" Lady Douve mocks the woman as the Spirit Summoner tries to muster the strength to stand.

"You…haven't done anything…"

"And you haven't accomplished anything yourself, have you? Why are you here? Did you come to make me laugh? Fine, I'll laugh. Tonight, when I have Tahlan in my arms, I'll tell him, 'A woman who's in love with you tried to bite me, but I made sure she took a nap on the floor.' He's kind, unlike me, so no doubt he'll say, 'I see. I'm sorry for causing you trouble,' and apologize to me."

Lady Douve has yet to lay a finger on this woman; instead, she's mercilessly pummeling her with words. I suppose words really can hurt people.

"Silence…! His Highness is just being fooled by you! If he knew what you're really like…"

"Heh… Just because you have no confidence in yourself, you think I'm the same way and play some silly role? Do you really think the Tahlan you're in love with is so foolish that he'd be deceived by a little acting?"

Reality sure is harsh. After all, Tahlan actually loves the fact that Lady Douve has a twisted personality. It's a really harsh reality for all the women in love with him.

"A hard, hairy body… A weak little kitten who's all roar and no bite… A kitten who can't even lay a hand on me… Do you really think my Tahlan would fall in love with someone like that?"

The cruel and precise barrage of words is more than enough to break the woman's spirit. She's unable to speak again, simply spilling tears on the floor. Despite the fact that we're in a fantasy world with magic, the battle between women is still as ruthless and real as it is anywhere else.

"Ahh, so you finally see yourself for who you really are. Good. It'd be a pity if you just saw me as the villain and tried to blame me for everything. It's best to correct people when they're making a mistake, mm?"

Tahlan is the handsome man who even other men love. Meanwhile, the woman he loves, Lady Douve, is the woman who every other woman loves to hate. Well, I guess that's the sort of woman it takes for Tahlan to rest easy in his choice. After all, I'm pretty sure Lady Douve's about the only woman in the world who happily insults dangerous women who are trying to kill her.

"Heh, it's nice to be kind to people."

In a way, Lady Douve has an extremely positive mindset. I mean, it's impressive to look at an assassination attempt as an opportunity to humiliate and mock an enemy out to kill her. It's definitely in character for her, though.

"Sansui."

"Yes, my lady?"

"A little better, but…still dull."

And she still has her complaints.

"My apologies."

"You're making me worry about the exhibition… Can't you win in a way worthy of Arcana's greatest weapon and House Sepaeda's ace? In a way that'll please both Tahlan and the king?"

"Please rest assured that I won't use the techniques I just used in the exhibition."

"Oh, so you've learned quite a few new Arts. Your master and his fellow Immortal were both quite flashy, so am I allowed to have some expectations of you?"

It's true that, of late, all we've been doing is riding in a carriage all day, but that wasn't all we were doing throughout the entire journey. We actually took time along the way to train with the others. Thanks to that, I'm able to use most of the techniques my master taught me in actual combat. Still, I can't have her expecting my master's flashiness…

"I'm still nothing compared to my master. I can't match him in that respect…"

"I'm kidding, Sansui… I can't have you destroying this kingdom."

Impressive, my master, to make even Lady Douve draw back in hesitation and answer seriously. I guess he's the sort of person who's beyond jokes, or maybe his existence is sort of a cosmic joke in and of itself.

"Shall we be on our way, Sansui? I'm sure this woman's companions are lurking in the shadows, mm? We can leave her here, right? I'm tired of rubbing salt in her wounds."

"Yes, there are several of them waiting. Once we leave, they'll probably come to collect her."

Ordinarily, it'd be a major diplomatic incident to lay out the retainer of a foreign royal in the middle of a palace hallway, but that's not actually true in this region. From what Tahlan's told me, it's considered shameful for a royal with the Royal Presence to get injured. Disease is something else, but injuries in battle are a mark of shame.

It'd be one thing if she challenged us in public and lost, but to try an ambush in the dead of the night and lose, well… There's no way that would work to her benefit. Even if she was to lie and claim that we attacked her from behind, she'd just be mocked for being so weak. Strength may result in glory, but it also means the strong are in a tough position. No one's there to protect them or speak up for them.

"Oh, yes. Allow me to warn you that Sansui is the seventh of the Arcana Kingdom's warriors in the exhibition. As such, he's the strongest of our people. I don't know who you'll be putting up against him in the seventh match, but…if you don't want to be humiliated, you should make sure you've won by the time his turn comes around."

Despite the fact that she said she was tired of rubbing salt in her assailant's wounds, Lady Douve continues to speak to her. Maybe she thinks she's giving sage advice? I suppose, in that sense, she's giving the enemy a gift. Though, honestly, I think it's more that Lady Douve's tired of using salt and wants to start rubbing chili peppers into the enemy's wounds instead.

"If you put your little heads together and discuss it among your sad little friends, perhaps you'll be able to pick up a win? If you make that your goal, you might end up getting beaten, but at least you won't be outright humiliated."

Yeah, bullying is still not a good thing and watching Lady Douve reinforces that point for me. If the attacking woman was the main character in some saga, she'd recover before the exhibition and come back with greater powers, but reality doesn't work that way.

"Sansui."

"Yes, my lady?"

"I know you've always thought of me as a younger sister."

I freeze at the sudden comment, uncertain how to respond.

Please don't change the subject so suddenly, Lady Douve.

"I can still count on you from now on, yes?"

"I'll continue to protect you with all my ability."

I may be a dull older brother, but there’s no lie in my stated desire to protect my spoiled little sister. I do feel relieved that she’s not my responsibility anymore, but I’m also happy that my little sister is marrying so well. I guess that’s just what it means to be a feeling human. You have to take the good with the bad.

Part 13 — Showtime

The king of Magyan, Magyan Khan, had made a full recovery. As such, along with the arrival of guests and participants from the neighboring kingdoms, the royal exhibition was set to begin.

Magyan Sukreen's team looked very much like an alliance between all of the neighboring kingdoms in the region, which prompted much speculation among the Magyan people. Word spread that the princesses of the neighboring kingdoms were in love with Tahlan, wanted to avoid losing him to a foreign woman, and had banded together to keep it from happening.

The fact of the matter was that, other than the sixth and seventh warriors, the Arcanian warriors were also all women. Based upon the traditions and values of the region, the people of Magyan suspected that the exhibition was intended to be a place for the women with the Royal Presence to show off their own abilities.

The beautiful, powerful princesses of the neighboring kingdoms were thus assembled before the king. That alone was enough to cause a stir among the people of Magyan, as all of the women present either had claims to neighboring thrones or otherwise belonged to the Magyan royal family. Those women were risking their lives in this challenge to take the hand of their kingdom's prince. This naturally excited their imaginations.

But the people of Magyan failed to notice that a group of foreigners was also present, each clearly dressed differently than the warriors and soldiers of the foreign kingdoms, in the area provided to Magyan Sukreen's team for their preparations. It was perfectly natural for retainers and servants of warriors to accompany their masters. The people just dismissed the foreign girls as members of the foreign retinues and paid them no heed.

Now, while described as a public arena, in truth, it was simply a clearing in front of the palace. The terrain was dotted with the occasional tall tree, but they were hardly dense enough to qualify as a forest. It was a minor detail that a large number of spectators had climbed those trees in search of a better view.

In a duel, the only important thing was the duelists themselves. Perhaps because of that traditional view, compared to the arenas in Arcana and its neighboring countries, the royal arena was an extremely simple affair. However, that didn't mean the Magyans were a primitive or uncivilized people.

As evidence, the benches where the warriors waited were covered by tents constructed out of lavishly decorated fabric. The cushions placed upon the ground were also of such quality that it seemed a shame to simply lay them on dirt. The guest seats where the foreign royals sat were similarly appointed, and they were just as richly decorated as the king's seat. Of course, there were differences in the decorations, as the stitched patterns were different depending on the occupant, there being a unique pattern for the king, for guests, and for the participants.

“We will now conduct an exhibition between fourteen warriors in Our presence.”

Perhaps due to his Royal Presence, Magyan Khan spoke in a loud, powerful voice despite not having put any effort into projecting his voice. The king spoke loudly enough that each of the spectators in the square could hear him.

“Young warriors will fight in tribute to Us, in hope of Our recovery. There is no need for flowery words at such an event.”

The fourteen assembled warriors knelt in a show of respect. Similarly, the people packed into the square, while jostling one another, also all took a knee.

“Fight honorably and win honorably. That is all We ask of you.”

With that, twelve warriors returned to their tents, leaving two combatants for the first match in the square. The spectators stood up and prepared to cheer.

“Now…”

The king looked upon the arena. The two young women squared off, dropping into stances. They were alone in the center of the space, or that’s how it appeared, at any rate. It was good enough.

“Begin!”

Cheers erupted from the crowd. Simultaneously, Siyanchi Envee, princess of the Siyanchi Kingdom, swelled in size as her Royal Presence took hold.

“Great guardian spirit of our royal family, possess my body and defeat the enemy!”

She transformed into an animal that was somewhat more sleek and svelte than a tiger or lion, perhaps some type of panther, though it was difficult to tell for sure. Still, having taken the form of an enormous predator, it was easy to see that she was a powerful figure.

By contrast, the Arcanian woman simply dropped into a stance, holding her hands out flat like blades. Only those at the very front of the crowd could see her, and there was a murmur of concern at her comparatively fragile form.

“Sunae… Your retainers are brave,” Sukreen said to her daughter beside her, pity in her voice.

The Magyan royal family was seated in the same tent as the king. Although Magyan Khan had many children, Sukreen had only her son and daughter, both of whom were effectively fighting against her.

“After all, she is fighting with nothing but her body in a fight she has little chance of winning.”

“Yes, I’m proud of all of my retainers. They are the true treasures that I’ve gained in my journey.”

Mother and daughter had similar facial features, but also wore the same expression on their faces. Neither of them had the slightest doubt that their side would win.

“My sense is that not all of them can even fight against Spirit Summoners. In particular, the first through fourth appear quite weak.”

Sukreen was simply voicing her own observations, from the perspective of a warrior powerful enough to have won the position of first consort. As such, even when sizing up a warrior from a completely different martial tradition, she could sense the difference in ability between them and their opponent. She understood that, while Siyanchi Envee had the skill to be worthy of fighting before the king, Yabia of the Four Vessels Style still had much to learn.

Yes, she was aware of the gap between them, and her impressions weren’t wrong. No one, not Magyan Khan, nor Heki, Tahlan, or even Sunae contradicted her.

“They’re far too young. Are you sure they’re worthy of fighting in such a place?”

King Khan intentionally turned a deaf ear to the debate. His focus was entirely upon the warriors facing off before him. It was undeniable that Sunae’s warrior appeared weak compared to her opponent. However, the duel had already started, and there was no point in talking about it. The ones who were worthy of attention were the fighters in front of him.

“That’s exactly why they’re fighting, mother. It’s precisely because they’re young that this duel has meaning.”

The giant predator let out a roar and pounced upon the girl, as all of the royals watched the fight unfold. Those with a claim to the throne because of the Royal Presence; those who lacked a claim because they lacked the Royal Presence; and so, too, their mothers: all of them watched avidly. They were prepared to bear witness to the day’s events.

“The meaning is there precisely because they’re still young and have much to learn. It’s because they’re facing a difficult challenge and will win. That’s the whole point of today.”

A giant arm lashed out. The other evening, Sansui had avoided such an attack by teleporting the assailant away, but Yabia, the girl in the arena, instead prepared to take the blow with her right arm and leg.

She placed her right elbow and right knee together, combining them so that her arm and calf formed a single line. It was beyond obvious that her one-footed stance wouldn’t let her resist the blow, and no one was surprised when Yabia was engulfed in blood.

“Guh…!”

What was surprising, however, was that the giant predator leapt back on three legs, missing her front forelimb.

“Four Vessels Style, Right Half, Receiving Blade.”

Yabia, who was covered in her opponent’s blood after cutting off the limb that had been unleashed against her, set her right foot back on the ground and quietly named her technique.

“I-Impossible!”

Half of a left arm, once the striking limb of a giant predator, had been lopped off of Envee's body and had returned to its human form as it lay upon the ground. The painful scene caused the crowd's cheers to fall silent.

"I see. The Royal Presence, Spirit Summoning... The ability to turn one's body into a great beast. It seems it truly is a power that can defeat the Marked," Yabia said softly to her opponent. No, she was demonstrating her own pride to those watching.

Sukreen's face lost its absolute conviction. Sunae's expression remained as confident as it had started.

"However, the power that runs through my body is known as the Orb Blood. The fighting style that has been passed down through my family is known as the Four Vessels Style. Its strength is in turning one's limbs into perfect blades."

A giant beast had swung its claw at an object with all its might, unaware that it was attacking a sharp blade. In that case, the relative martial skill was irrelevant, and it simply came down to a demonstration of the difference in their Rare Arts.

"Our Four Vessels Style turns our limbs into weapons! What allows that is the Orb Blood! Orbs are the perfect vessel and the perfect form!"

The giant predator was supposed to be immune to sword and spear, bow and arrow. While the power was spoken as a manifestation of a divine spirit, in the end, it was still an Art wielded by mere mortals.

"You underestimated me, Spirit Summoner! Taste the cutting edge of my fists and feet!"

The Four Vessels Style was far superior to a Spirit Summoner's offenses and defenses. Indeed, the hardening effect and the sharpness of the Orb Blood were superior to even the Legendary Sword. There was nothing in the world that a wielder of the Orb Blood couldn't cut.

At the completely unexpected result, both the Magyan people and the honored guests could only watch in stunned silence. First, all of them shared the belief that the Royal Presence was the most powerful of the blood talents. They had believed that the Divine Beast forms of the most powerful Spirit Summoners provided armor that would stop any blade, and claws that would cut through any defense.

However, that understanding had now been turned on its head. Instead, they witnessed the Art that truly had the most powerful blade and most powerful shield. They were so stunned that they couldn't even muster a cheer as they witnessed the most powerful limbs provided by any Rare Art.

"Guh...!"

"What is it? You can't maintain that form for long, can you? And that bleeding, I doubt it will stop soon. More than anything, this is a duel held in honor of Princess Sunae's father's recovery. If you are so weak that you tremble in fear at the unknown, you should leave this field immediately."

As could be seen in the expressions of both Sunae and Sukreen, the first battle was proceeding as the Arcanians had planned. This outcome made all of Sukreen's cheating meaningless.

Just as Eckesachs had guessed, Sukreen had prepared several Art wielders who could strengthen others and had them strengthen her warriors. However, that only has meaning in a long-running battle. The assumptions behind their support collapsed the moment an opponent appeared who could settle a battle with a Spirit Summoner quickly. The energy provided by a Consecrated Maiden only replenished the target's physical stamina. It couldn't heal the target like the Mystic Arts, never mind healing lost limbs like the Tainted Blood.

Envee's initial blow had the entirety of her strength behind it, yet it had been torn asunder by Yabia's defense. The result was a nightmare scenario, not just to Envee, but to all Spirit Summoners. An opponent who was immune to their greatest and strongest blow was a terrifying concept that none of the Spirit Summoners had thought would ever appear.

On the other hand, to both Sunae and Yabia of the Four Vessels Style, things had unfolded exactly as they'd hoped. Envee had completely underestimated her opponent and attacked without the slightest bit of hesitation. That was why Yabia had been able to perfectly counter the blow. Had this been the second or third duel, instead of the very first fight, she wouldn't have been able to land such a perfect counter.

"If you won't move…then I'll come to you!"

Yabia took off running. It was an impressive burst of speed for someone who didn't have the Royal Presence, but her movements were slow by Spirit Summoner standards. To Siyanchi Envee, fully enhanced by the powers of Spirit Summoning, Yabia appeared to be moving in slow motion.

The noble treasures were simply support items that allowed anyone to wield the Immortal Arts, and there was still a sizable gap in the power of the enhancement bestowed by the Immortal Arts and Spirit Summoning. That was why Envee could have responded however she wished, whether in the form of a counterattack or simply avoiding Yabia's charge.

"R-Raaaaaah!"

However, dodging was not an option for her in this duel. Had this been a simple fight to the death, Envee could have avoided Yabia's attack and perhaps even fled the battle. However, this was a royal exhibition, and both warriors had put their honor on the line. Envee didn't have the option of turning her back on her enemy. The Arcanians were watching, her king was watching, the kings of other kingdoms were watching, and more than anything, the man she loved was watching this battle.

Siyanchi Envee was objectively faster, larger, and stronger. Which was why she cast aside her fear and stepped forward. Standing on her hind legs, she lunged forward with her intact right front leg.

"Ahhhhh!"

In response, Yabia simply held out her right hand in front of her. Her action would barely count as a block to an ordinary martial artist. It would, at best, have resulted in sprained fingers; in the worst possible case, she would have lost her fingers entirely.

However, when combined with the hardening and sharpening effects of the Orb Blood, her hand became a bladed shield that sliced open everything it came into contact with. A giant carnivore's claw and a human's spear-hand blow clashed, and the enormous gap between the two in both strength and mass was easily overturned by the power of the Four Vessels Style. Yabia's hand sliced through the beast's front leg as though through butter.

Before Envee's brain even registered the pain from the wound, Yabia gracefully leapt upward and lashed out with her right leg. The Temperan fighter was using the effects of the Feather Step Sash to lighten herself, and she swung her right leg in a crescent kick sped up by that effect.

"Four Vessels Style, Foot Blade, Torso Piercer."

There was no need for her to place any strength or weight behind the kick. The Four Vessels Style simply required that its wielder land the blow to slice through the target, and when it did, her kick split the giant beast's side, blood and entrails spilling out.

"Enough!" As all of the spectators fell silent, King Khan alone spoke up, putting an end to the battle. No one could deny that it was an honorable, glorious victory.

"Yabia, Sunae's retainer!"

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

Yabia tamped the brief display of arrogance and fell to one knee, paying respect to the king in the Magyan manner.

"You have proven the mettle of your Four Vessels Style! I congratulate you on defeating a warrior possessed by the Divine Beast!"

"You honor me with your praise."

"It was an elegant and quick victory, worthy of the initial duel."

The guests from the Siyanchi Kingdom and Siyanchi Kesri, Envee's sister and the second warrior scheduled to fight, had to fight back the urge to hurry over to the fallen Envee. They just barely managed to restrain themselves.

"Siyanchi Envee, honored daughter of Siyanchi, congratulations to you for facing an unknown enemy and overcoming your fear."

As Envee quietly bled from her wounds, the king offered brief words of praise to the defeated princess.

"It was impressive. We will never forget your courage. Healers from the foreign land, We entrust her care in your hands!"

With those words, the Arcanian Mystics assigned to the Magyan Kingdom finally made their way over to Siyanchi Envee. The saving grace for her under the circumstances was that all of the Mystics present were first-class healers. Further, the amputated limbs had been cleanly split, making reconnecting her lost arms a simple matter. Combined with the

juice of a Coiled Peach that had been given to the Magyan Kingdom, Envee somehow survived her serious wounds.

The spectators watched as the foreign healers skillfully treated Envee. On one hand, the spectators were reassured by the sheer skill of those healers, but they were also frightened by what they had seen of the Four Vessels Style. A martial artist who easily sliced apart a Spirit Summoner in Divine Beast form was an enemy that far exceeded their worst nightmares.

"She lives and her limbs are healed... Healers of Arcana, impressively done. Now, return to your seats, all of you!"

Hearing the king's words, everyone remembered what they had forgotten in the carnage. Yes, this was merely the first match of seven. In a way, this was simply the opening act.

"For the second bout...! Siyanchi Kesri, Princess of Siyanchi! Suji of the Bursting Venom Style, retainer of Sunae! Step forward!"

The Mystics helped the exhausted Envee off the field, while Yabia walked back to the tent under her own power. Meanwhile, the two young women who would fight the second duel stepped onto the blood-soaked grounds. Kesri's expression was tense, unnerved by the unexpected result. By way of contrast, Suji's eyes glinted with barely contained excitement. Yabia's win had been all the motivation she needed.

"Ready... Begin!"

At Khan's signal, Kesri transformed into a giant beast. Like Envee, she had transformed into a giant panther, but unlike her sister, she remained in place, glaring at Suji. It was understandable, even if she was aware that Suji was a practitioner of a different martial art than Yabia; having witnessed the previous duel, Kesri couldn't help but be cautious in her approach.

Suji had both of her bare feet planted on the blood-soaked ground, lowering her hips into a defensive stance. She was completely focused on defense, giving up her mobility in the process. It was only natural that Kesri would regard her with caution.

"What is it? Are you not going to make a move?"

Of course, this too was as Eckesachs had planned. Having Yabia of the Four Vessels Style go first was also intended to help Suji of the Bursting Venom Style gain an advantage in her own duel.

"It matters not to me, but, well, you see...time is my ally."

Suji's lips quirked in a genuine smile, not a trace of a bluff behind her expression. She was infusing the ground below her with her Blood Aura through the soles of her bare feet.

"Caution is fine, but...you might very well lose without being able to do anything."

"What?!"

The ground was soaked with Envee's blood. That made it difficult to see the change at first, but by now Kesri could see that the ground was slowly changing color, emanating from Suji's feet. Even if Kesri didn't know the

precise mechanics behind the Bursting Venom Style, it was enough to tell her that things were developing in Suji's favor.

"If you wish to approach, do so… That is, if you're not afraid."

If Kesri could have retreated, she absolutely would have. Unfortunately, that wasn't an option for her. She felt the intense gaze of everyone watching the duel, including the guests from the neighboring kingdoms, the Magyan royals, and even the common spectators. If she ran here, she'd forever be branded a coward.

"Mother."

"Yes, Sunae?"

Sunae and Sukreen didn't look at one another as they spoke. They kept their eyes on their chosen warriors as they restarted their war of words.

"This reminds me that it takes a powerful determination to be king of Magyan."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Sansui Shirokuro, the seventh warrior and the bodyguard of Sister Douve, was able to easily dispatch all five of my retainers in their first encounter."

The five of them had attacked Sansui at once, and Sansui hadn't had any forewarning of their abilities. However, he had defeated them as though batting aside petulant children, neutralizing them without killing or even injuring anyone.

Sunae was telling the royals present a simple but brutal truth about the strength of Arcana's most powerful swordsman. It hadn't particularly fazed Sunae or Tahlan at the time, but thinking carefully about it now, it had actually been a remarkable achievement. Yes, it was now that they finally realized just what the title of the "strongest" that Sansui had been given by Suiboku really meant.

"The same is true of the Magyan king. No matter the opponent, no matter how little they know about them, they have no choice but to accept any challengers. That's what the title and the responsibility are supposed to mean."

"Insolence. Do you mean to say that girl could defeat His Majesty?"

"No. His Majesty would most certainly defeat both Yabia and Suji. However, that is only because His Majesty is substantially stronger than any other Spirit Summoner."

Of course, it was easy to argue that Yabia was able to fight at an advantage and win because her opponent had never seen her fight before. But, even setting that aside, the Four Vessels Style was an extremely difficult Art for a Spirit Summoner to counter. There were probably those who had greater skill in that style than Yabia, and even ignoring that, facing an enemy that could cut you apart simply by touching you was terrifying. Using their current method of fighting, it would be difficult for a Magyan to defeat a wielder of the Four Vessels Style.

“Mother… Wielders of Spirit Summoning, myself included, have only ever witnessed other Spirit Summoners and Shadow Summoners. My first and last contribution to this kingdom will be to ask this question: how much does Spirit Summoning need to change and grow?”

Yes, the unknown was something to fear. It was true that the kings of the region, not simply Magyan, had both the character and the personal sense of honor necessary to take on any challenger. However, that still presupposed that the enemy was using an Art that they were familiar with. Or, perhaps it was merely an arrogance born of ignorance.

“Spirit Summoners are neither the strongest, nor are they invincible.”

Such a statement was insolent, bordering on blasphemy. Sunae didn’t show nearly enough respect for an Art given to them by their Divine Spirits, or so everyone in the royal tent should have said. Her observation was something that no member of the Magyan royal family should ever voice.

However, all of them had already witnessed a wielder of the Royal Presence be completely overwhelmed by the user of an entirely new Art.

“It seems you’ve grown arrogant by taking retainers beyond your station.”

“You are mistaken there as well, mother.”

Sukreen viewed Sunae with contempt, suspecting her of using her money or authority to recruit those stronger than her as her retainers. However, Sunae bluntly denied her mother’s allegation and confidently asserted her own position.

“I’ve defeated them using my Spirit Summoning. The only reason that your warriors can’t defeat my retainers, mother, is because they’re not fighting my retainers correctly.”

Sunae firmly believed that Spirit Summoners wouldn’t lose if they thought their tactics through, and that they would become substantially more powerful just by making small changes to how they fought.

“It happened mostly by chance. There was a time where I had to fight inside an Arcanian castle. Unlike a Magyan castle, it had no wide-open spaces and I couldn’t fight in my full beast form.”

Watching the warrior before her hesitate, Sunae continued speaking to her mother.

“Among the enemy there were quite a few wielders of fire magic. I ended up fighting them without becoming a Divine Beast.” She referred to the night that she fought to defend Ukyou from assassins. “I was able to defeat the enemy easily.”

No doubt it was partly because the enemy was made up of average opponents that Sunae had been able to easily defeat the enemy. She hadn’t thought deeply about those events at the time.

“Later, I fought a Marked.”

The duty of every Spirit Summoner was to fight and defeat the Marked. Everyone who listened was surprised to learn that Sunae had fulfilled that duty.

“I transformed into the Divine Beast and defeated the Marked.”

That was the natural outcome. At the very least, that was what Eckesachs had said at the time. Yes, there was nothing unusual about that outcome. The issue was what came after.

“While the Marked was certainly powerful, the crux of the issue is what came after the battle.”

“What...are you trying to say?”

“Mother, the Divine Beast is a form suited for fighting the Marked and other Spirit Summoners. When fighting wielders of other Arts, the form is largely superfluous.”

While events didn’t directly support what Sunae had to say, it was at that moment that the duel began in earnest. Kesri realized that she couldn’t simply sit and wait, as the results would be obvious if she didn’t move. As such, she needed to do *something* , for the honor of her kingdom.

The giant panther let out a roar as she lunged forward, executing the most powerful attack of one of the largest beasts on the planet. Quite simply, the only ones capable of moving faster than such a beast were extremely powerful Marked with the Tainted Blood, an Immortal who had mastered Flash Step, or another Spirit Summoner. Even if Suji wore a Sash of Quicken Self, she wouldn’t have been able to avoid it. Or, even if she were to avoid such a blow once, she wouldn’t be able to continue avoiding the follow-up attacks.

“Bursting Venom Style… False Blast, Wide.”

The Seeping Blood was not, by its nature, well-suited for use in martial arts. However, that was why there had been many different techniques developed for the Bursting Venom Style.

The ground at Suji’s feet, the soil that had changed color, suddenly erupted. The explosion was centered around her and also caught her in the blast, as the area around her was engulfed in dust.

Kesri charged into that cloud of dust in her giant panther form. Having already lunged, the princess was able to notice the effect with some surprise, but continued her charge undeterred.

The spectators all tensed, wondering just what would happen in the dust cloud after what they had witnessed in the last duel. However, the only things that emerged from the dust cloud were Suji and Kesri, covered in dirt.

“Just a dust cloud?! What an empty bluff! The most you can do is cover my body with dirt?!”

“Yes, that’s my intention.”

And then…

“Bursting Venom Style… Layered Blast, Dust Explosion!”

The dust cloud that Suji had scattered and the dirt that had landed on Suji and Kesri’s bodies all suddenly exploded.

Layered Blast was one of the greatest Bursting Venom Style techniques. One of the properties of the Seeping Blood was that its explosions didn’t

trigger secondary explosions. The explosive energy only burst when triggered by the wielder, and any infused energy wasn't impacted by flames or explosions that happened around it.

What Suji had done when she infused the dirt with her Seeping Blood was divide the exploding soil into two different types. The first type exploded in the False Blast and created the dust cloud. The other type had been scattered by the first explosion and ended up clinging to the bodies of those caught in the dust cloud. Of course, she had kept the blast strength of both at a minimum.

Suji's clothes were a noble treasure in themselves, and they served to protect her body. Further, she had hardened her own body and defenses using a Sash of Harden Self. Despite that, her defenses were nothing compared to those of Kesri's Divine Beast form.

That said, though, there was an immense difference between explosions that one was prepared to be hit by, and explosions that suddenly occurred on and in one's fur after letting one's guard down.

"Gaaaah!"

The dust clinging to every part of Kesri's body exploded. It was easy to imagine just how painful those blasts would be on her eyes, nose, and ears.

Suji, who was well aware that she had an opening, quickly recovered from the explosions that had hit her and immediately ran toward Kesri. Like Yabia's Four Vessels Style, there was no need to place one's weight behind the Bursting Venom Style's techniques.

Having increased her speed using her Sash of Quicken Self, Suji began touching Kesri's body, as though gently petting the giant panther, as her opponent rolled around in pain. There was no need to directly touch Kesri's hide. With a simple brush against the Divine Beast's frizzled fur, Suji was ready to attack.

"The blood that runs through my veins seeps into all that I touch and dyes them my color! That blood then eats at the target like venom before bursting! Hence…the Seeping Blood and the Bursting Venom Style!"

The first two explosions had simply been a distraction, a feint to create an opening. They were weak explosions triggered under the assumption that Suji herself would be caught up in the blasts. The Bursting Venom Style, the most lethal of the martial arts practiced in Tempera when prepared with the intention of killing, could easily break through the defenses of a giant animal.

"Bursting Venom Style, Serpentine Blast Trail!"

Having confirmed that she wasn't in the blast radius, Suji then triggered the single line of energy she had drawn on Kesri's body. The explosion was powerful enough to easily pierce Kesri's defenses.

"Curse your foolishness for standing before me naked."

Everyone watching now understood how Suji's martial art worked. Kesri had essentially been subjected to having explosives directly placed against her body, and Suji had then triggered those explosives. It was easy enough

to imagine the effects of such a blast. She may have taken the form of a giant panther, but she was still a living animal. Everyone could sympathize with her pain.

"Enough!"

Kesri lay sprawled painfully on the ground, bleeding from her side, her fur smoldering from the explosions. There were many among the spectators who turned their eyes away, unable to look as she writhed in pain.

"Suji of the Bursting Venom Style! Well fought!"

"You honor me."

"A powerful martial art, to turn one's own blood aura into explosives! Further, We praise you for your raw courage in unflinchingly standing within your own blast!"

Magyan simply praised the victor, without recrimination for his distant relative, the wielder of the same Royal Presence that he himself used, for losing.

"Sunae, you have been blessed with good retainers! A powerful and brave warrior who has no hesitation at jumping into the fire for their own victory! You two are a credit to her! We look forward to your continued loyal service!"

"Yes, Your Majesty. I will serve her well."

"Kesri, you were unable to avenge your sister. However, everyone saw your bravery. Know that the only dishonor in loss is to begrudge the victor! Healers of Arcana, We entrust her health to you!"

As such, the second duel had come to an end as quickly as the first. The spectators quietly exchanged glances. Could it be that the Spirit Summoners might all lose, without a single win? There was no joy or excitement among them at the thought. All they felt was fear and a wavering confidence in those with the Royal Presence.

"Good job, Suji."

"Yeah, somehow managed to win…"

Having returned to the tent, Suji let out a breath at Ran's praise. The truth was that she had faced off against a giant beast. Because the Bursting Venom Style, unlike the Four Vessels Style, didn't have much in the way of defensive skills, she might have done poorly if Kesri had attacked her immediately at the start of the duel.

"Still, thanks to the Legendary Sword's tactics, I was able to fight relatively easily."

"Of course. There are specific tactics that are best suited for duels. It was the right call to reserve the Drunken Fist Style and Mist Shadow Style for the second half!"

As Suji noted, it was Eckesachs's tactics that had let the relatively unskilled Yabia and Suji fight with confidence. The opponents in the third and fourth duels would likely fight as planned as well. It really was a great disadvantage to have an enemy that knew all of your capabilities.

“Know one’s enemy, develop tactics suited to dealing with them, spend time in preparations, and produce results. That, too, is a form of martial arts!” Eckesachs said, nodding approvingly.

She had been right in placing the Four Vessels Style first, due to the fact that it was extremely deadly against an unprepared opponent, and in placing the Bursting Venom Style, which needed a certain amount of time to be most effective, after the Four Vessels Style.

The Arcanians had succeeded in throwing the entire enemy team into a state of confusion. This meant it would be easier to force the opponent into falling right into the traps set by Drunken Fist Style and Mist Shadow Style.

“Still…are you two okay with this? You’ve won, but…no one around you is praising you,” Ran asked Suji and Yabia. She asked because she knew well why the four of them had followed her out of the village.

“You all left the village because, as daughters of cadet houses, you were tired of all the nonsense of honoring the main house and throwing fights to let them maintain their authority, right? Weren’t you unhappy that no one would praise you for winning even if you ignored the instructions to throw the fights?”

“That’s true… But, Ran, we’ve grown too. We’re content with having the king praise our victory.”

“That’s right… Besides, we know well that fairness has nothing to do with how someone feels when something they’ve believed in loses.”

The four who had followed Ran had been born to cadet houses of their Arts. They were pretty strong for their age, but that only meant they weren’t that different from the members of the main houses. There were times when they could beat their cousins from the main houses, and they were confident enough that they wouldn’t lose in straight-up fights.

However, the adults around them wouldn’t allow them to do so. They were told to know their place as members of the cadet branches. It was only when Ran had smashed those expectations that they had been motivated. At least, until Ran lost. Not just once, but twice, then three times.

“We know how demoralizing it is when a powerful figure, someone who’s far more powerful than ourselves, ends up falling to an enemy without being able to put up a fight.”

Yes, and Sunae and Tahlan also knew that feeling of despair. In spite of that, the two of them were making a show of putting those results on display. It was as though they were telling their people that the kingdom’s greatest problem was that no one in the kingdom wanted to admit that Spirit Summoning had its limitations.

Part 14 — Anguish

There were many among the spectators who were desperately holding back the urge to shout that these duels were a farce. It was clear to everyone watching that the Arcanians were impossibly powerful. Well, if they thought about it calmly, at the very least, they were capable of attacks that could pierce a Spirit Summoner's defenses. Whether slicing or exploding, once the attacks hit, there was no way for a Spirit Summoner to withstand the damage. That was something that no one present could do anything about.

The third match was between Donzila Gayaou and Kazuno of the Drunken Fist Style. The only thing that the spectators felt going into this match was apprehension. No one knew whether a quick attack or waiting to see how the opponent would move was the right approach.

The enemy knew about how the Spirit Summoners fought, while the Spirit Summoners knew nothing about the enemy. No one present, Gayaou included, had ever considered that possibility until this point. This region had been far too uninterested in things that they knew nothing about. The truth was that, despite knowing that there was a world beyond their borders, they had all considered every other Art to be inferior to Spirit Summoning.

"Princess of Donzila. I thank you for your hospitality when we were in your kingdom."

"Silence."

Having transformed into a giant tiger, Gayaou still hadn't found a way to attack her opponent.

"As thanks, I'll be gentle in defeating you."

"How dare you!"

It would have been better to fight someone stronger. After all, with an unknown opponent, none of the information from the previous duels was of any use. Gayaou could feel the panic building among her fellow princesses waiting their turn behind her. The fact that all seven of the Arcanians used different fighting Arts made it impossible for Gayaou to commit to a particular approach.

At this rate, the cheat they had prepared was useless. Not only had the fights not turned into long-term slugging matches, but the enemy had also quickly dispatched their opponents. None of the princesses had considered even the possibility of such an outcome.

The duel had already started. Of course, no one other than Saiga or Sansui could see what was actually happening. Kazuno had activated her technique. There was nothing Gayaou could do.

"Lord Saiga, can you see it? I can't see it with my eyes, but no doubt you can see it."

"Yeah, I can… She's already created her energy field."

Only the two aces sitting in the tent could see the invisible sphere formed by the Inebriated Blood. It first expanded around Kazuno, and then it seemed to ooze along, sliding forward. The sphere was large enough to completely engulf Gayaou in her beast form, but it was strangely wobbly as it moved.

“This, too, is a form of martial art. There are times when conversation with the opponent has serious intent behind it.”

The energy field constructed by Kazuno was a dangerous thing, a space that warped the opponent’s sense of balance. The sphere had exploited the opponent’s caution and was now poised to topple the giant tiger. The moment the field made contact with Gayaou’s head, it seemed to ooze around her, enveloping her. At that very moment, the outcome of the match was settled.

“Guh… Wha?!”

Compared to walking on two legs, standing on four legs provided substantially greater traction and balance. Gayaou had been standing on four legs, but suddenly she began to collapse, as though disoriented. She somehow managed to retain her footing by moving her legs, but her wobbling gradually grew more pronounced. It was as though she had suddenly gotten drunk and thus completely lost her sense of balance.

“Drunken Fist Style, Globe of Disorientation. You’re already under my spell.”

“Wh-What have you…?!”

Kazuno approached with an unhurried walk, putting up little in the way of defense. Gayaou desperately tried to resist the effect of the energy field around her. But, despite her desire to run, she couldn’t even manage to walk, and despite wanting to attack, she was barely able to keep herself upright.

“My Drunken Fist Style disrupts an opponent’s balance. Of course, it doesn’t work as well against those with the Royal Presence… However, at maximum strength, it seems to be enough to neutralize you.”

What Kazuno feared most was having her opponent move around quickly, making it impossible for her to capture her target. Of course, there was a possibility of landing a lucky shot at a distance, and given that the enemy had no means of making a ranged attack, if she deployed the field around herself, she still could have caught her in the trap.

However, her opponent was a Spirit Summoner and had taken a Divine Beast form. The energy field created by Inebriated Blood could only disrupt the opponent’s sense of balance. If her opponent charged in and placed the entirety of their weight behind the attack, even if they collapsed in mid-charge, there was still the possibility that they could bowl Kazuno over with their momentum.

Further, in Divine Beast form, Spirit Summoners were incredibly heavy. Tripping up her opponent only to be crushed beneath their weight was something Kazuno wanted to avoid at all costs.

“Neutralized…me?! Powerless?!”

“You’re struggling against me and you’re about to lose. I think powerless is the right term.”

Gayaou wanted to attack, but couldn’t. It was though the world was spinning around her, and she couldn’t even stay upright.

“You blasted foreigners and your strange Arts…”

“Strange… I see, I suppose they’re strange from your point of view… Yes, indeed, it’s quite pitiful to know so little about the world. I now understand what the others thought of us when we first appeared in Arcana.”

Kazuno was mocking herself, but her mockery of her past self also applied to all of the spectators here, who, unaware of the wider world, had allowed themselves to believe they were without equal. Though perhaps different in scale from her own lack of knowledge, it was still the same hubris born of ignorance.

“Think of yourself as fortunate that you’re simply losing to a strange Art. The fifth, sixth, and seventh fighters on our side will teach you despair at just how much greater the world is than your little corner of it. You won’t have to suffer that knowledge. You truly are lucky.”

Kazuno put gloves on, each a different color. They were roughly crafted and made of straw, to be sure, but they were also noble treasures crafted by Suiboku for wielders of the Drunken Fist Style: the Mountain Lifter and the Star Grabber. The Mountain Lifter made whatever the wearer touched lighter, while the Star Grabber made whatever they touched heavier.

“You’ll feel pain, of course…but you’re still very lucky.”

Gayaou tried desperately to act, even as her legs threatened to give out from under her, but her sense of balance was so skewed that she could no longer grasp which direction she was facing.

Kazuno circled around behind Gayaou and grabbed her by the tail. With that, even the spectators saw that Gayaou’s body no longer had any weight. She was still engulfed by the sticky energy field as she floated upward like a balloon. The Donzilan princess desperately flailed her limbs as she floated into the air.

“Yikes…”

Gayaou had completely lost her sense of balance and was now weightless, with no way of touching the ground. Saiga couldn’t help but sympathize with her, remembering being in a similar position.

Yes, there was no need to even think about what was going to happen next. The silent spectators couldn’t help but cover their faces. Everyone knew what was about to happen to the cat that had been lifted up by its tail. All that remained was for her to get slammed into the ground.

“Fall!”

Suddenly Gayaou became much heavier than normal, and she fell to the ground, unable to absorb the impact due to her lack of balance. While she wasn’t particularly high off the ground, because of her complete lack of

balance and sense of direction, when she returned to her human form, she had multiple broken bones.

A pained silence surrounded her. The third duel, too, ended with the Spirit Summoner unable to do anything in response.

The fourth duel was to be Deyiaoe Hinse against Konoko of the Mist Shadow Style. As she watched the pair about to fight, Sunae told her family of the greater world beyond that she had experienced in her travels.

"Mother, Spirit Summoners are still extremely powerful. I still believe that to be the case."

"How dare you say such a thing after what you've done today."

"Of course I can still say that. At the very least, *I* can defeat these four."

"That's because you already know how they fight."

"Then, mother, how would you deal with a Four Vessels Style practitioner?"

Sunae had publicly humiliated Spirit Summoning and dishonored its users. Sukreen trembled with anger in response, but that, too, was as expected. Sunae responded coolly to her mother's rage.

As for how to fight against the Four Vessels Style… Sukreen found herself at a loss for words. Yes, limbs that could slice whatever they touched were far superior to the claws of a Spirit Summoner. Sukreen had never considered how to fight against such an opponent.

"It's simple. Fight at human scale. You simply need to attack the head, the stomach, the back…whatever part of the body that isn't the fighter's limbs."

"That's…"

"Yes, traditionally, it's considered a mark of weakness for a Spirit Summoner to fight at human scale. In that form, they could lose against Shadow Summoners, and there's no way someone at human scale could defeat a Divine Beast. However, that's…only relevant in fights against a Spirit Summoner or a Shadow Summoner."

In this region, the only established Rare Arts were Spirit Summoning and Shadow Summoning. That was why there was no need for a Spirit Summoner to develop any fighting style other than transforming into a Divine Beast. However, different opponents required different tactics and approaches.

"Mother, Spirit Summoning as an Art is extremely well suited for fighting Shadow Summoners. However, what would happen if an average Shadow Summoner fought a practitioner of the Four Vessels or Bursting Venom Style?"

It was easy enough to imagine. The Shadow Summoner would use their shadows to see how the opponent responded. Once they've seen how the opponent fights, they could then use additional shadows to attack.

Sukreen quickly drew the conclusion she had wanted to avoid; it was far too easy for her to imagine the outcome of such a battle. When fighting against a completely unknown opponent, Shadow Summoning was a superior Art to Spirit Summoning.

"So you're asking that I admit that Shadow Summoning is superior to Spirit Summoning?"

"No... I wish you to accept that they are equal."

"Semantics!"

"Then, mother, can you see what's unfolding before you and say the same thing?"

At that moment, a Spirit Summoner was unable to make a move against a foreign warrior. Konoko had created countless duplicates of herself opposite her foe.

"Oh, she's just a Shadow Summoner," Hinse snorted mockingly, reassured at what she saw before her.

Yes, it was true that Shadow Summoners couldn't defeat a Spirit Summoner. That was an absolute law of battle to those who hailed from this region. If all that was different about Konoko's Mist Shadow Style was its name, then there was nothing for her to worry about. Hinse showed no sign of panic, and didn't even bother to move as Konoko's meaningless attacks assaulted her.

While Konoko's countless shadows assailed her, someone spoke up about what was actually happening.

"No! She's not a Shadow Summoner!"

It was a shout from a spectator, something that would never have happened under ordinary circumstances. The shout, almost a cry, probably came from one of her retainers who was a Shadow Summoner. Those who had achieved a certain degree of mastery in an Art could recognize other practitioners of that Art. The Shadow Summoner knew that Konoko didn't have the Shadow Presence.

That was what made her so terrifying. She was able to do something similar to Shadow Summoning despite not having the Shadow Presence. There was a possibility that her techniques would work on a Spirit Summoner.

"Wha...?!"

Hinse dropped into a defensive crouch at learning Konoko wasn't a Shadow Summoner…then was caught entirely by surprise. While Shadow Summoning created shadows with mass, none of the duplicates in front of her had any substance behind them.

Mist Shadow Style was a fighting style that made use of Illusion Blood, and unlike the destructive potential of Four Vessels Style or Bursting Venom Style, or the ability to influence another living creature like Drunken Fist Style, Mist Shadow Style simply created illusions with no mass. In this world, it was an Art that couldn't even move a hair on a person, an Art that went beyond weak and entered into the realm of useless.

“O-Oh… A paper tiger…”

If the opponent was human, it could be used to execute a feint against them and land a blow during such an opening. It was an extremely useful Art against the Testudo Style, since that Art relied primarily on visual precognition, but it was completely useless against a Spirit Summoner. However, that’s only if it was used on its own.

“You call it a paper tiger, mm?”

Mist Shadow Style incorporated the use of concealed weapons to make up for its lack of offensive power. This was why it was considered a martial art of equal effectiveness to the other styles in Tempera. Of course, the power of a weapon was largely dependent on its size. As such, there was a limit to how powerful a concealed weapon could be, and against a Spirit Summoner, a concealed weapon was next to useless.

However, the weapon she wielded was a noble treasure that Suiboku had crafted for a Mist Shadow Style practitioner. The existence of that item rendered all such assumptions meaningless.

“You underestimate my Mist Shadow Style and call it a paper tiger…”

It’s true that the illusions created by the Mist Shadow Style didn’t have mass. However, it could still be used to block an opponent’s line of sight and conceal what the wielder wanted to hide.

“Thank you. That makes this an easy win for me.”

The weapon in question wasn’t fast. If Hinse wanted to avoid it, she probably could have .

A single vine that had been concealed by Konoko’s illusions crawled up Hinse’s leg. It sought out the most vulnerable spot on every living thing—the throat.

“Wha— Agh… Guuhhh!”

The vine should have been powerless against a Spirit Summoner, but instead it coiled around Hinse’s throat, depriving her of air.

“G-Gaaaah!”

Hinse struggled desperately, trying to find the location of the vine and remove it from her throat. However, she couldn’t find the right vine to cut; it was precisely because it was an illusion that she couldn’t touch it to cut it.

“Can you hear me? Let me teach you the simple way of getting rid of that vine.”

“Guh… Guh…”

No matter how powerful the body, it still couldn’t survive without blood flowing to the brain. Moreover, these duels allowed for fighting to the death. Simply by continuing to squeeze Hinse’s throat, Konoko could achieve victory. However, the Temperan offered her opponent advice anyway.

“Release your beast form. Your body will shrink. Of course, it might also just come loose when you pass out.”

It seemed Hinse heard the advice, and so she shrank and returned to human size. She suddenly found it easier to breathe and tried to catch her breath.

“It’s over.”

However, Konoko grasped something in her hand and landed a blow on Hinse’s wide-open face. That single blow was enough to knock the breathless princess out cold, throwing her to the ground.

At the same time, the illusory vine disappeared. All that was left in its wake was something so thin that it was barely visible to the naked eye. Konoko then collected that item. Yes, there had never been a vine there to begin with. Konoko hadn’t carried a vine with her into the arena, after all.

“This noble treasure is the Inward Strand. This is what was actually choking you. It’s much thinner than the vine you saw, isn’t it? When used to strangle a person, it cuts into their skin and becomes hard to dislodge. But that’s all that it is.”

It wasn’t an item that could do anything extraordinary; it couldn’t move very quickly, and if the target got loose before it tightened, that was the end of it. Had Hinse been calm, she probably could have dealt with the situation. That was exactly why Konoko had used her Mist Shadow Style to distract her from what was actually happening.

“I’m sure there were things that confused you, but this is the reality.”

The victor directed brutal words at the fighter that had taken the lightest injuries of all of the losers so far.

“It seems this paper tiger was enough to defeat you,” Konoko said in triumph.

The arena was quiet. Sukreen, in particular, was in complete denial. The four elite warriors she had chosen had all lost to four average warriors. The reality of the situation silenced both the people of Magyan and their foreign guests.

The exhibition was to consist of seven duels and Sukreen’s side had already suffered four defeats. As such, there was no way for the future she envisioned to ever come to pass. Even if her warriors won all three of the remaining battles, she would still have lost the competition. This meant that she couldn’t challenge Heki and the others afterward.

“Mother, this is not over yet. This is only the prelude,” Sunae said, explaining the truth to her shell-shocked mother.

“Those who are about to fight are true elites, worthy of claiming the mantle of the strongest.”

Those who heard her words felt their blood run cold. They felt a shiver run up their spines and their brains froze in dread. If the first four warriors had been a mere prelude, then the true suffering was yet to come.

Part 15 — Overwhelming

The fifth duel pitted Deyiaoe Utto against Ran of the Silver Demon Style.

The Arcanians had already won the exhibition tournament by achieving victory in the first four matches, giving the spectators and the important guests little reason for optimism, as they had no path to victory. Further, all four of the matches up to this point had been one-sided. The Arcana Kingdom's warriors had faced their matches prepared with plans that were intended to secure certain victory.

There was very little hope left for the locals in the remaining three matches as well. There was no way that the Arcanians, who had been thorough in their preparations, would suddenly go easy on Sukreen's warriors. Moreover, the first four warriors had been Sunae's lowest-ranking retainers. The remaining three were Sunae's direct retainer, her fiancé, and a close retainer of Tahlan's fiancée.

Everyone saw that the last three warriors were on a completely different level in terms of importance when compared to the four who had started the exhibition. The warriors who were watching also knew simply from looking at Ran that she was a fighter of no small skill.

"We've already won. I suppose it'd be fine to let you win the remaining three fights, but this isn't just a polite little exhibition. And, honestly…I want to win."

Ran stood in the arena with a firm determination to achieve victory. She wasn't looking to show off her skill to foreigners; rather, she simply wanted to defeat the woman standing before her.

"You…are quite skilled among Spirit Summoners, right? I bet you're stronger than Her Highness."

"Yes, I'm stronger than Sunae."

"Then there's plenty of reason for me to fight you."

Once Ran had finished explaining herself, her hair started to move. It flared into a shining silver color and began to ripple like flames. Everyone present knew what that meant.

"So, you're a Marked."

"Yep, that's right… Ordinarily, there's no way I could win against a Spirit Summoner."

Ran, who claimed to be a Marked, was eerily calm, far different from the Marked described in the legends. While this region only had Shadow Summoners and Spirit Summoners, there were also tales of the Marked who occasionally appeared to wreak havoc upon the people.

The locals couldn't understand the Arcanian choice. Why would the Arcanians, who had hitherto focused so intently on winning, send a Marked to fight a Spirit Summoner? They had no idea why Ran had been chosen to fight the fifth duel.

"That's exactly why…this fight has so much meaning. It's a way for me to prove that, through my survival, I've managed to grow stronger."

Yes, there is meaning behind choosing Ran, even if the spectators may not understand it.

"If I'm honest…there's a part of me that's happy that I have a chance to defeat a Spirit Summoner. I admit, that's a petty, ugly part of my mind…but that's not all that drives me."

Ran closed her eyes, then opened them again. She gazed intently at her opponent, her motivation coming not from adrenaline, but from her own choice, her own determination to fight.

"Take your Divine Beast form. I'll surpass you in strength even then."

The Divine Beast form wasn't necessarily the right way to fight a wielder of the Four Vessels or Bursting Venom Styles. However, it was still the best use of Spirit Summoning when fighting a Shadow Summoner or a Marked. Or, rather, it was said that taking that form was the only way to defeat a Marked. Unlike the last four battles, Ran was an enemy who wielded an Art they knew well.

"Good!"

Utto couldn't back down. Even setting aside the fact that this was a royal exhibition, Utto, like Sunae, had a duty as a Spirit Summoner to face off against a Marked. Even as she knew that there was something more to Ran than the average Marked, Deyiaoe Utto took her Divine Beast form, putting her own pride on the line.

"Then all that remains is to defeat you with my claws and fangs!"

Now, why was it that Spirit Summoners had an overwhelming advantage against the Marked? Put simply, it was because the physical enhancements of a fully prepared Spirit Summoner exceeded the physical enhancements of the most powerful of the Marked.

"Yes, that's the form. I'll exceed the power of a Spirit Summoner in that form."

Even if Ran increased her own physical abilities to their very limit, she still couldn't match a Spirit Summoner. That was true when she faced Sunae and it was still true today.

"But, I'm no longer a Marked. Understand that I call myself a practitioner of the Silver Demon Style for more than just show."

The gap in physical abilities, however, didn't mean that Ran had no chance of victory.

"Let's go!"

Ran began running, just as she had in her battle with Sunae. She charged, fully aware that it wouldn't be enough on its own.

Deyiaoe Utto also understood that Ran had something else up her sleeve. Even armed with that knowledge, she took a defensive stance, following the standard approach when facing a Marked.

Just as the legends said, Ran's speed exceeded Utto's agility while in Divine Beast form. If Utto moved or attacked first, Ran could easily avoid her attack. That was why she intended to block Ran's attack and

subsequently land a counterattack. There was no other logical way for her to respond.

"Come at me...!"

The clashes between Spirit Summoners and the Marked had raged since the age of legends. As though tracing the steps of her forebears, Ran struck out against the giant predator, leaping forward and lashing out with a punch at her opponent's stomach. Ran had sought to land her blow against a vulnerable pressure point, but her opponent was able to redirect her fist.

A strike unleashed at full speed with her entire weight behind it was extremely difficult to completely redirect in mid-motion. Instead, Ran's punch, although not missing Utto entirely, had landed on a relatively well-protected part of Utto's stomach.

"...?!"

Utto had intended to absorb the blow and counterattack against the Marked while her opponent was suspended in midair. At least, that had been her plan. However, the Divine Beast found that, when she tried to execute her intention, she couldn't move. As the spectators watched, Ran landed safely with no counterattack from Utto.

"Silver Demon Style... Ki Wave, Whale Breaker!"

It wasn't that Deyiaoe Utto *didn't* counterattack. It was that she *couldn't* .

"Ran, the technique I will teach you is known as Ki Wave. It's the technique Sansui uses to send a wave of energy against whatever he touches."

"I understand your confusion. With your Tainted Blood, you aren't able to use the Immortal Arts."

"However, Ki Wave and Ki Blade aren't solely Immortal Arts. They're techniques that anyone can use with enough training."

Ki Wave, the technique that she had learned from Suiboku, would allow her to overwhelm any Spirit Summoner she faced. Regardless of the Blood Aura that an individual possessed, Ki Waves became more powerful the greater the amount of power that ran through the user's veins.

Whale Breaker was a Ki Wave technique designed to be used against an opponent who was attacking or defending with all of their strength. The technique temporarily stunned the target and robbed them of their ability to act. As a Marked, Ran had an enormous amount of Tainted Blood running through her body, and her Ki Wave was so powerful that it was enough to stun even a Divine Beast.

"I know... I know that when fighting a Marked, a Spirit Summoner focuses entirely on reacting. Therefore, the obvious response is to develop a way to deal with that!"

The stunned and unmoving Divine Beast bent her legs and began to sink to the ground. She was still conscious, but she was no longer able to support her own weight.

Standing next to the beast's flank, Ran dropped into a stance that almost shouted that she had no need to get a running start, readying her fist. It was clear to every observer that she was readying a blow that could pierce a Spirit Summoner's defenses.

"Silver Demon Style, Ki Wave… Quivering Feet!"

As she stepped forward, Ran released a Ki Wave from the soles of her feet. Driven forward by that burst of energy, she drove her fist into Utto's flank far more powerfully than usual. Utto was blasted into the air with an impact that shook the ground, landing in a heap in human form.

"Well done!"

A voice from the Magyan royal tent offered words of praise to an outcome that might very well undermine the very foundation of royal authority and destroy the myth of Spirit Summoning's superiority. It was Magyan Sunae, Ran of the Silver Demon Style's liege lord.

"As expected of my greatest retainer! My father is quite impressed!"

"You honor me, Your Highness."

Everyone knew this was all a charade, but none could voice a complaint. With her hair still blazing silver, Ran stood down from her fighting stance, taking a knee in front of her mistress. There was no hint of berserker rage or madness to her. Even if her loyalty to and respect for Sunae was an act, even having a Marked pretend to act this way was an extraordinary feat.

"Yes. Ran, Our daughter's loyal retainer. We bore witness to your strength! No doubt your exploits will be sung both in Our kingdom and by Our neighbors!"

There was no choice but to offer words of praise, for Khan's own daughter had tamed the battle lust of a Marked and raised her into a loyal retainer. That fact alone made a Spirit Summoner losing to a Marked seem like a trifling detail in comparison. Magyan Khan offered praise in lieu of all of the guests who had fallen silent.

"Still…for a warrior of your ability to fight fifth… Come, speak the truth. We can't imagine you are inferior in skill to the first four, but surely you aren't stronger than the remaining two, are you?"

"Please rest assured, Your Majesty…"

Had the Arcanians completely ignored the relative strength of their warriors and changed the order in which they fought, it would have been considered a petty and underhanded tactic. Khan was aware that was probably not the case, but he still made certain to confirm the fact.

Ran's reply gave no reassurance to the spectators who heard them.

"The remaining warriors are far more powerful than I am."

"So, it's finally my turn."

Saiga took off his shirt and jacket, exposing his torso as he stood up from his seat. There was a determined cast in his eye and it was easy to see the results of his training in his physique. He had scars across his face, and he

had the bearing of a veteran fighter. Of course, that was only what was visible at a glance.

“Mwahahahaha! How do you like my tactics? My master, the stage has been set, so let us engage in battle now!”

“Yeah, thanks to you it looks like we’ll win all seven matches. You can stand back and watch.”

Saiga confidently stepped toward the arena, leaving his sword in her human form. He carried no weapons and no armor, making his way to the arena without any noble treasures in hand. Eckesachs was caught completely off-guard for a moment before she clung pleadingly to her master.

“W-Wait, my master! Aren’t you…aren’t you forgetting something?! Surely it’s impolite to go unarmed to a duel, even if it is just an exhibition!”

“Eckesachs, you need to calm down. Remember what Sansui said to me when I fought him the third time?”

The Ultimate Legendary Sword Eckesachs is one of the Eight Sacred Treasures, and her function is to amplify the blood aura of every existing Art in the world. She is a weapon perfectly suited for Saiga in his role as House Batterabbe’s ace, but she was also completely unsuited for the current exhibition.

“If I used you, Eckesachs, I’d kill my opponent.”

“Whaa?!”

There was no need for Saiga to kill his opponent to achieve victory, much less wield Eckesachs to do so. As such, there was no need for him to use her. Having matured through his experiences, Saiga had made the right judgment. At times, someone’s growth could expose brutal truths.

“O-Oh no… I’ve made him too strong.”

“I’m going to fight bare-handed this time, so hold on until we fight someone really strong, or against a lot of opponents.”

“When will that be?!”

“Well, that I don’t know…”

While Saiga looked apologetically at his fighting partner, who was suffering flashbacks of a similar past trauma, he also addressed the women who were his romantic partners.

“Happine, Zuger.”

“Yes?”

“What is it?”

“I’m about to fight for Sunae. It’ll be pretty messy.”

Saiga tried to convey that it would be best if they didn’t see or hear the coming duel. This was a fight where he needed to show off his strength, and he couldn’t just end it by peacefully putting down his opponent and leaving his strength unproven. He needed to show his overwhelming power to those watching and make them fear him.

“Times like these, I’m not a fan of being able to see the future…”

Saiga stepped into the arena with an expression of determination on his face. The opponent before him was already pale when he stepped up to face her.

Magyan Toris, his opponent, was the only participant in this exhibition who was a member of the Magyan royal family; evidently she was one of Tahlan's younger half sisters. Her expression may have been of an already defeated opponent, but she had the build of an extremely well-trained warrior. No doubt, as one with the Royal Presence, she had put in a great deal of training since childhood.

Compared to her years of training, Saiga's own effort was little better than the dabbling of an amateur. There was no doubt that Saiga was the one with the least training among the participants in this royal exhibition. But, even so, he couldn't back down.

"I truly am sorry, but you're going to suffer the most out of anyone here."

Because Ran had won an overwhelming victory in the previous duel, he needed to win in a way that put her victory to shame. Further, he needed to honor Sunae, his fiancée, as well as the name of House Batterabbe, who had invested so much in him.

"You have every right to insult and mock me. You have every right to hold me in contempt. You have every right to hate me."

Saiga had a responsibility to show just how ridiculously, off-the-charts powerful he was. He needed to show just how unfair, how ludicrous, his strength was in comparison to everyone else.

"I'm Saiga Mizu, the heir and ace of House Batterabbe, one of the Four Great Houses of the Arcana Kingdom. I'm also Magyan Sunae's fiancé. I'll prove my mettle using your body as a target."

Saiga had already foreseen what was about to happen, how the battle would progress, and how it would end. He knew what the result would be before he even fought the duel. Unfortunately for the woman before him, there was only the worst possible outcome awaiting her.

"While the rules say you can't complain about the results, I think you have a right to complain about me. That's just how unfair I am."

Tapping into Royal Presence gave rise to Spirit Summoning. The spectators were caught off guard at seeing the all too familiar sight of Spirit Summoning. Saiga remained in humanoid form as fur covered his body.

"Yeah… I'm really sorry. Unlike Ran, I'm not that good at controlling my Tainted Blood."

Tapping into his Tainted Blood gave rise to Silver Demon Style. None of the spectators could believe what they were seeing—something was happening to Saiga's body that shouldn't have been possible with a Spirit Summoner. The same thing was happening to Saiga that had happened to the Marked that had fought earlier, as all of the fur on his body blazed a bright, burning silver.

"I can't hold back the excitement of battle."

Tapping into his Shadow Presence gave rise to Shadow Summoning. Two humanoid wolves, their fur flaring with silver flame, appeared out of nowhere in front of Saiga. Witnessing the appearance of the two additional figures, everyone doubted their senses, yet were also struck with the certainty of what was happening.

“Don’t worry. We have the Divine Ginseng. So long as you don’t die, you’ll heal.”

Tapping into his Seeping Blood gave rise to Bursting Venom Style. The two shadows touched one another on the shoulder and the silver wolves began to shift into a different color. They retained their silver sheen, but their fur took on another color.

“So, give it your best!”

Tapping into his mana gave rise to magic. Flames burst out from the feet of all three wolves and lifted them off the ground.

“I’ll listen to your insults later. I’ll apologize later!”

Tapping into his Orb Blood gave rise to Four Vessels Style. The wolves’ fists hardened.

“You’ve sworn not to complain even at the cost of your life, but...!”

Tapping into his Time Power gave rise to Divination. Or, perhaps his Celestial Blood gave rise to Testudo Style. Saiga had already decided what his duplicates would do.

“I’m sure you didn’t think you’d be subjected to this much!”

Saiga Mizu was the ace of House Batterabbe and all of the blood auras flowed within him. Moreover, he was capable of wielding all of them at once. The mad grin on his face was, ironically, that of a Marked.

“It’s too late for regrets! I’ll crush you just before the point of death...!”

Saiga had taken an inhuman form, with an inhuman expression of madness on his face. Having been given his powers by God, he was putting his superiority on display.

“What are you doing? Hurry up and turn into a Divine Beast.”

“Oh.”

“Do you want me to attack you now?!”

“Eep...!”

There was probably never a Spirit Summoner who had taken Divine Beast form with such a look of fear on her face. It was unprecedented for a Spirit Summoner to take the Divine Beast, activating the entirety of her power, after being frightened into doing it, all for the sake of survival.

Even so, there was no one who could blame Toris for doing so. It was clear to everyone watching that Saiga was on a completely different level from the five who had come before him. He was using multiple techniques at once, both known techniques and those that the spectators had never seen before.

Even the people of Magyan and the surrounding region knew the rule, despite only knowing of Shadow Presence and Royal Presence: a single

person should only have a single innate power. Which was to say, each person could only practice a single Art.

For a human being to be able to use all of them at once completely destroyed any and all assumptions that underlaid battle in this world. It was simply madness. The fact that he could use all of the foreign techniques that had left such an overwhelming impression in the last few duels made the absurdity of the situation even more apparent.

“Good... Now I won’t kill you!”

Ran was the only one who could continually maintain the state of full physical enhancement provided by the Tainted Blood. Even if Saiga wasn’t using the most physically depleting regenerative abilities of the Tainted Blood, the longest he could remain in his blazing silver berserker state was several minutes.

Still, that was more than enough time to settle the matter. It was impossible for a mere Spirit Summoner to endure for even ten minutes facing off against Saiga in his current state.

“Jet Knuckle!”

Saiga burst forward with his flame magic, putting all of his weight behind his charge. All three wolves shot forward like meteors and hit the beast below them.

“Guh...!”

“This feeling... The feeling of my fist hitting, the feeling that I can’t get from Divination! That’s what I wanted!”

Saiga shivered with the joy of violence. The Tainted Blood had enhanced his enjoyment of battle, of battering his opponent, and his features twisted in a look of feral joy.

He left an enormous opening for his opponent in that moment, but there was no counterattack. The Divine Beast couldn’t muster anything of her own through the pain of being struck by three berserker werewolves at once.

“What’s wrong? Are you going to end up nothing more than a punching bag, just like I foresaw?!”

Saiga let the madness take him. If he had wanted to kill Toris, he just needed to use the Bursting Venom Style the moment he touched his opponent. If he had wanted to simply neutralize his opponent, all he would have had to do is subject her to the Drunken Fist Style, then pummel her into submission.

However, he didn’t take either of those courses, as they would go against the goal of this exhibition. Just as the royals ordinarily did to their challengers, Saiga needed to one-sidedly beat down someone weaker than him.

“Aren’t you supposed to be strong?! Come on, come on, come on! Don’t lose to me! Don’t run! Face me!”

As Saiga himself held the beast’s head, the two duplicates jumped backward and crafted energy walls with the Mystic Arts.

“Bright Jet Press!”

The duplicates maintained the walls of light in front of them, blazing forward with flame magic and flattening the Divine Beast between them. All of the spectators closed their eyes before the actual attack landed. They knew immediately that it would be painful just by looking at the setup, without even seeing it happen.

“Gah… Ahhhhhhhhhh! Ahhhhh…!”

Toris, as the target of the attack, couldn’t look away. The sheer agony that came from being crushed between two giant walls wasn’t something she could escape from just by closing her eyes.

“C’mon now, it can’t hurt that badly! Mystic walls are nothing more than light!”

The mystic walls crushing the beast vanished simultaneously as Saiga himself drew back with his fist, itself encased in a giant gauntlet of light. It was an ordinarily useless offensive use of the Mystic Arts.

“It should hurt more just to suffer normal blows! So you should be able to resist!”

He stood on the ground, covering his hands with mystic power, and struck with both fists. The Divine Beast, her resolve already shattered, could do nothing but take the blows.

“I have no intention of killing you! I’m giving you everything I’ve got with just half my effort!”

Each time his supposedly half-effort fists made contact, blood spattered onto the ground. Of course, the blood soaking the ground wasn’t Saiga’s.

“You need to show off your mettle! Wasn’t that the plan?!”

He was harming the sister of his beloved fiancée.

“This is what you were planning to do to me, isn’t it?!”

He was enraged at the bald facts and was throwing a tantrum.

“You were planning on humiliating me in front of Sunae, weren’t you?!”

He pummeled Toris with his giant fists, letting out a loud yell, overwhelming her with the barrage of blows. It was a terrifying visage, one that sapped at what was left of her morale.

“With those claws! Those fangs! You were going to tear me to pieces and humiliate me, weren’t you?!”

Toris and the other princesses had intended to win all seven matches against Saiga and the other Arcanians, then challenge Heki and the other siblings. By defeating them, they were planning to make it so that Tahlan couldn’t escape. No doubt they had planned to one-sidedly beat down Sunae’s fiancé, Saiga, while they were at it.

“You thought I didn’t have the Royal Presence! You thought you could beat me! And you looked down on me for it, didn’t you?!”

He couldn’t forgive the fact that someone so weak had been looking down at him.

“You’re still operating under a misunderstanding, aren’t you?! That I’m a cheater! That I’m ridiculous! That there’s no way to beat me! Aren’t you?!”

The two shadows were touching the ground. The Seeping Blood of the Bursting Venom Style soaked the ground beneath them and dyed the ground below them.

“I bet you think I’ve never lost before!”

In his state of heightened excitement, he had gone from driving home the unfairness of his existence to just bitching. Still, his shadows moved as he had initially planned, creating a small explosion that was just enough to blast whatever was sitting atop it into the air. That blast was enough to toss the Divine Beast into the air.

“You think it’s because I have all the powers, right?! That I’ve won every fight I’ve faced till now, easily!”

He created a light platform about two meters off the ground so that all of the spectators could see, continuing to rain down blows on his opponent as they stood upon it.

“It’s been nothing but losses for me! I’ve done nothing but get humiliated in front of the girls I love! I’ve been hurt! I’ve been embarrassed! I get depressed a lot! I’ve always wanted to win and impress them!”

He erased the platform of light, stepping on his opponent from above and shoving her toward the ground, following up with fire magic.

“Were you hoping for a different outcome?! Did you think I’d lose on purpose to let Sunae’s mom save face?!”

Saiga used all of his strength to kick the giant beast lying on the ground. He hadn’t covered his legs with Mystic Armor this time, but had instead simply hardened his legs with the Four Vessels Style. While he couldn’t slice his opponent, the surface of his legs was much harder than a Divine Beast could handle. A painful thud rang out that everyone could hear.

“I’ve got no expectations of making friends with Sunae’s mom or anything! You think I’d act based on convenient little fantasies like that?!”

To be disliked by someone, to be resented by someone, to be hated by someone... Saiga was well aware that those were all painful things to deal with. He knew that even Suiboku had his regrets about things that couldn’t be mended.

But Sunae and Tahlan weren’t afraid of being hated, because they knew there was something more important than simply being liked. It was a fantasy to believe one could live without being hated, without making enemies.

“Losing is humiliating, it’s embarrassing, and it disappoints people! That’s what’s going to happen to you!”

The badly beaten Divine Beast lay sprawled on the ground. As she desperately tried to maintain her full reinforcement, just in order to cling to life, the two duplicates approached on foot.

“I am!”

The two shadows that had been infused with the Seeping Blood exploded.

“Sunae’s man!”

When the effects of the blast cleared, what lay there was an unconscious woman.

“If Sunae wants me to, I’ll make an enemy of her mom too!”

The silver flames died down and all that remained was a tired man.

“I’m not such a nice guy that I can go easy on my opponent. That’d be an insult to everyone who’s fighting alongside me.”

He turned his back to the woman who lay there, unmoving.

“That’s who I want to be. That’s who I ought to be.”

Part 16 — New Technique

“Just kill me now…”

Having returned to his seat, Saiga’s shoulders drooped as he stared down at the ground. Typically, he wouldn’t have let his battle rage get so far out of hand, but clearly, he’d used that battle as a form of psychological release.

“This is only speculation, but I believe it was probably because there wasn’t as much mental pressure on you for that duel. You were fighting an ordinary opponent, rather than Master Fukei or Master Suiboku. As such, your pent-up frustrations and the other feelings you’d kept bottled up came bursting out.”

“Sansui… Thanks for the breakdown.”

“You need more training. You haven’t mastered the Tainted Blood enough to use it in public.”

“In all honesty, you could have just grabbed me by the head and stopped me.”

“If you had gone over the line, I would have done so.”

In the very worst case, Sansui would have stopped him. That knowledge probably made it easier for Saiga to lose himself in his battle lust. Still, he was able to avoid crossing the line, though even Saiga couldn’t deny that not crossing that line was a pretty low bar.

“Why is it that I can never fight an opponent who’s about right for me to fight…?” The depressed Saiga sighed with a pout. “I wish I could fight against someone who’s just powerful enough that it’d take all of my effort to beat…”

Up to this point, Saiga had frequently fought opponents like Sansui, Fukei, and Suiboku, who were so ridiculously powerful that Saiga lost in spite of his own broken power level.

“Why am I always fighting opponents I stand no chance against or opponents who aren’t any challenge…?”

“You’re being disrespectful to your opponent. She was a warrior worthy of serving as the sixth contestant in the exhibition. Her spirit was already broken, so she wasn’t able to show the true extent of her ability, but…that’s pretty much all due to Eckesachs and her planning.”

While Sansui was offering her praise, Eckesachs, like her master, found herself depressed at the outcome. Everything had gone according to plan, but that meant that she hadn’t needed to be used. She couldn’t understand how things had ended up this way.

“I’ve already realized…that I’ll be abandoned again… I’m no longer needed once my wielder becomes strong enough… It’s just as Dainsleif said…”

It seemed she was wallowing in Suiboku having abandoned her, falling further into gloom. Her sadness and despair ran deep, but it would have been odd for Sansui to try to reassure her. After all, it was his turn to fight.

“So, I suppose I’m up.”

The man with a wooden sword on his hip stood up without an iota of pressure on him. The man who appeared to be the youngest of all the Arcanian warriors was about to conduct a duel with the trust of all of his team members on his shoulders. The ace who was perhaps the most worthy of such trust in this entire world stood up and prepared to fight as the final contestant in the exhibition.

“Sansui,” Douve, his mistress, called out to his back. “I’m bored.”

“…”

She was exceedingly bored, to the point where it seemed like the words were written on her face.

“Fighting a one-sided fight against an opponent, making them cry and wallow in despair… That’s only fun the first time around. Doing it six times is just redundant.” Her demeanor, her words, all indicated her ennui. “Do you really think His Majesty is going to feel better after watching these fights? At this rate, it’d be much better for me to feed him meat and wine myself.”

Because the arena was engulfed in a despairing silence, her voice sounded oddly loud in the gloomy air.

“Your orders are to end it quickly.”

“Understood, my lady.”

Sansui had detected the hidden meaning, the emotion that Douve had concealed behind her arrogant statement.

“Lady Douve.”

“Yes?”

“I’ll be doing a bit of unnecessary play, but I will make sure to end it quickly without boring you.”

There was no need to put on an elaborate show. Even if it ended quickly without much in the way of flash, that was because he had been ordered to do so. Having been given an excuse by Douve, Sansui stepped forward as the spectators focused their attention upon him.

The Arcana Kingdom’s strongest swordsman, the man who they confidently declared was stronger than a Marked or a man with innate talents for all of the Arts, was about to fight. There were probably those among the spectators who were afraid that he might accidentally kill everyone in the area.

The quiet man stepped into the arena in his simple clothes, then suddenly sat down in front of Magyan Khan’s seat. Having lowered himself to the ground, he bowed down in respect. Even if it wasn’t according to the customs of this kingdom, it was clear he was paying the highest respects to the king of Magyan.

“This is a show of respect from my homeland… I wish to take the opportunity to give my thanks for allowing me to fight the final bout of this exhibition. Your Majesty, I am deeply in your debt.”

There was nothing odd about his behavior. It was perfectly normal for a foreign warrior to pay the greatest respect to the king of the country he was in. However, the spectators, who were dispirited by the outcome of the previous six duels, were surprised by Sansui's behavior.

"Sansui Shirokuro... So, you're the greatest warrior of the Arcana Kingdom."

After witnessing Saiga's rampage, Khan had wondered if Sansui was a similar type of fighter. He speculated that Sansui would unleash a string of violence that far exceeded the power of a Spirit Summoner and savagely beat his opponent down. As though to deny that he was of a similar type to Saiga, Sansui was quietly, calmly paying his respects to the king.

"Yes. In the Arcana Kingdom, I've been given the honor of instructing Prince Tahlan and Lord Saiga."

Tahlan was a swordsman without peer in this kingdom. While he couldn't match Spirit Summoners in sheer combat ability, simply because he was a Shadow Summoner, Tahlan was widely admired by swordsmen in both his homeland and in the surrounding kingdoms. Everyone had found it difficult to believe someone who looked so young could teach Tahlan anything about swordsmanship. However, that had only held true until they had seen the fifth and sixth duels.

"I apologize that Lord Saiga was overtaken by his excitement and behaved rudely in your presence. That, too, is due to my shortcomings as his teacher. For the sake of the Arcana Kingdom's honor, I will fight this duel in an honorable and respectful manner."

"Ah, it would seem Our son owes you a great deal. We shall determine with this duel whether or not We can continue to entrust him in your care."

"I shall fight to the best of my ability in the hope of your complete recovery."

The final Arcanian warrior quietly stood up and turned to face his opponent. There was an enormous gap between him and the previous duelists in terms of demeanor. Where the others had been burning with aggression, Sansui stood calmly, waiting. He had a wooden sword in his sash, but other than that weapon, his appearance gave no indication that he was here to fight. That fact drew a certain amount of concern from the spectators, but his calm didn't appear to be an act, nor did it seem like his reputation was there simply to make him seem stronger.

"I am Shirokuro Sansui, apprentice to Suiboku and swordsman in the service of House Sepaeda."

The pride in how he carried himself was obvious. While he hadn't raised his voice or puffed up his body to make himself look bigger, there was conviction and confidence behind his words.

"I am Baigo Shiyoki, Princess of Baigo."

"Then let us begin."

Then, as though indicating there was nothing left to say, Sansui drew the wooden sword from his hip. No one watching the duel had any way of knowing that it was just a wooden stick carved into the shape of a sword.

However, Baigo Shiyoki had some advance knowledge about her opponent. Although it was secondhand information, she knew what sort of Art he had wielded a few days ago. He had used a technique that could move his opponent and a technique that strengthened his wooden sword. Those weren't techniques that could be countered when first encountered, but Shiyoki now knew that he wielded them.

At the very least, Shiyoki thought she wouldn't be as badly humiliated as the assassin who had targeted Douve a few days earlier.

"!!!"

Even then, her body froze when he suddenly appeared in front of her without any preparatory movement or sound. Although he stood in front of her, just holding his wooden sword, his sudden appearance prevented her from acting. The spectators and guests also took several moments to realize that Sansui had moved, an eternity in the heat of battle. Why was Sansui simply standing there without acting?

It was true that his opponent had yet to take Divine Beast form, but he had moved into his opponent's reach. Yet, even so, he stood there without taking a single action. Shiyoki assumed a werebeast form like Saiga, fur covering her body, even as she struggled to comprehend what Sansui was thinking. She enhanced her physical abilities with Spirit Summoning and lashed out with a claw.

"Inner Body Technique, Quicken Self."

Sansui was slow. While he had quickened his own body, he was still much slower than Shiyoki.

"Ki Blade Technique, Cross Touch."

While he moved slowly, Sansui's wooden sword made contact first. Simple physics meant that the tip of a wooden sword moved faster than the hand that swung the sword itself, but even then, Sansui's attack was slower than Baigo Shiyoki's strike. Despite being slower, his sword struck Shiyoki's unguarded left arm before her right arm could finish extending.

Sansui was controlling the timing of the fight. Having closed the distance with Flash Step, he had waited for Shiyoki to attack; before she could execute her maneuver, he had started his own strike. Sansui had exploited the moment where Shiyoki had gone from vulnerable to focused on her attack, and landed a blow on her left arm, which was even more vulnerable than if he had caught her completely off guard.

"It's light!" Shiyoki yelled after a brief, stunned moment.

Shiyoki had worried that her undefended left arm would be blasted back by the impact. However, her enhanced body had withstood Sansui's blow. There wasn't much pain, and she was able to continue her lunge forward with her right arm. Sansui bent his knees to avoid her attack and landed a blow against Shiyoki's right arm as it passed over his head.

“Your blows are light!”

Shiyoki couldn’t help but think there was something else behind his attacks, but since he was within her reach, she had no option but to continue. She used her left leg to brace herself as she lashed out with a kick, certain that it would land. It should have made contact, because she had placed all of her weight behind it, fully intending to hit him. She swung her right leg through with all her strength.

She missed.

The third parties watching the duel, the spectators, the escorts protecting the important guests, and even the guests who were skilled warriors in their own right all saw what happened with their own eyes. They saw that Sansui was avoiding the full strikes by Baigo Shiyoki by a hair’s breadth, using each opportunity to land a counterattack. His sword technique was superhuman.

Shiyoki lost sight of Sansui. As she couldn’t observe the exchange as an objective third party, she couldn’t deal with Sansui using her own arms and legs as cover to avoid her attacks. She felt panic welling up inside herself as she couldn’t land a blow against an opponent who was within her reach, as she lost sight of an opponent who was literally a hair’s breadth away from her.

“Wh-Where…?!”

Having completely lost sight of Sansui, she furtively glanced side to side. She was certain that her opponent wasn’t using some Rare Art to move. He had simply maneuvered himself into her blind spot with his movements alone.

As though to reinforce that point, Sansui stood back to back with Shiyoki, expression calm, as though he were taking a rest. While the sight could have appeared comical, no one who watched the duel laughed. Instead, they were gripped with anxiety and tension, not even managing to blink as they watched the exchange.

They understood that, in theory, there could be someone who had enough physical speed to keep up with a Spirit Summoner. They also understood that there could be someone who was so skilled they could assert their superiority at will. They knew the combination of those two traits would be able to do what Sansui had just done. What they couldn’t understand was how someone had the sheer nerve to continue executing such finely timed dodges and counterattacks in the heat of battle.

“Behind?!”

“Yes.”

As she turned around, Sansui brought down his wooden sword upon her head. A blow to the head would stun even a Spirit Summoner. That was particularly true if the blow was completely unexpected.

Sansui followed up the blow with a barrage of additional strikes. His sword landed without resistance, even as Shiyoki tried desperately to guard

her arms, her legs, and her stomach, and even tried to reach out and grab Sansui's wooden sword.

"Guh...!"

He waited for Shiyoki to provide the opening before landing the blows, which he could have done otherwise with ease. He made a point of showing off his skill, manipulating his opponent like a marionette and making her dance to his tune.

His speed was one thing, but in terms of technique, the observers understood what he was doing. Each move Sansui made was simple and easy to grasp. However, the fact that he was continuously, repeatedly succeeding with each and every blow was extraordinary.

The ideal warrior could execute the best response to any given action at the best time without fail. The ultimate realm of skill was to reach a level where they could calmly and coolly execute the basic tenets of fighting at all times, regardless of the opponent or the circumstances.

"Grraaaaaah!"

Baigo Shiyoki leapt backward with all of her might. She easily understood that she was facing an opponent who was on a completely different level in terms of skill. At the very least, it was reckless to engage in melee with the man she faced. While she had her doubts, she also had no other choice.

She tapped into her Royal Presence and transformed into a giant beast, enhancing her defenses and forcing herself not to flinch at the enemy attacks. She transformed into the four-legged beast, the beast that she had believed without a trace of doubt was the most powerful form in the world before this royal exhibition had brought that belief crashing down.

"Grrrrraaaaaaaah!"

"Immortal Arts, World Manipulation Art."

Having watched her transformation, Sansui quietly placed his wooden sword back into his sash. He closed his eyes, having decided that he had demonstrated his skill enough. It was time to end the duel.

"Collapsing Castle."

"Ahhhhh!"

The giant beast that towered over him…collapsed. It wasn't an analogy, like she bent her knees or bowed over at the waist. All of the joints necessary to hold up the giant four-legged beast that Shiyoki had become...every last one of them had been dislocated.

Everyone present stared as she was brought down without a single hint of forewarning. They continued to stare as she changed from her Divine Beast form back to her human form. They stared as she lay there, unable to move, like an insect whose limbs had all been torn off its body.

"Your Highness. This, too, is part of the practice of a duel. I only ask for your forgiveness."

Sansui bowed to Shiyoki as she struggled with the agony of having every single one of her joints dislocated, unable to move.

“Your Majesty, this concludes the seventh and final duel.”

Sansui then turned to the king and the other royals, bowing to them as they wordlessly watched the spectacle.

“Lady Douve, I apologize for keeping you waiting.”

Finally, Sansui bowed to his own mistress before he quietly walked back to the Arcanian tent. It was far too remarkable an outcome to describe as dull. It was far too depressing an outcome to take comfort in the fact that Shiyoki’s injuries weren’t fatal. The man who could say with conviction that he had no doubts about his Immortal Arts or his swordsmanship had won without showing even a hint of the true depths of his skill.

Part 17 — Overwhelming Defeat

With the seventh duel over, the exhibition was now settled. However, there was something more important than just the simple outcome of the duels—namely, what people felt about the battles they had just witnessed. The princesses had lost all seven duels. That alone was proof of how overwhelming their defeat had been, but the duels themselves had also been one-sided affairs from the first to the last.

None of them had been able to put up a fight worth mentioning, and all of them had simply been beaten down by their opponents. Douve's words were at least partly true; to a disinterested observer, the duels were dull and uninteresting. It was also true that they were hard to watch, at least in terms of just how painful it appeared to be on the receiving end of the beatdowns.

"Guh…"

Wrists, ankles, elbows, knees, shoulders, and hips all dislocated, Baigo Shiyoki couldn't move a muscle because of her unprecedented injuries. Still, her joints had only been dislocated. A moderately skilled healer could put them back into place.

"Your tendons are fine, so this should be enough."

"Yes, thank you."

Having had her joints reseated, Shiyoki lay on her back as she thanked the healer. When she turned her head, she saw the other warriors being treated, and she once again realized that she had been fortunate. The Mystics who Tahlan had brought with him from the Arcana Kingdom were using their healing skills in public, treating the vanquished duelists in full view of the honored guests.

Putting it a different way, the participants had all been so badly injured that only the foreign healers had the skills to effectively treat them.

Siyanchi Envee, who had fought Yabia of the Four Vessels Style—whose arms had been cut off, whose stomach had been cut open—now had her limbs reconnected, and her bleeding had been stemmed with Mystic healing.

Siyanchi Kesri, who had fought Suji of the Bursting Venom Style, had suffered light burns across her entire body along with losing a great deal of her skin to more severe burns from the final explosions.

Donzila Gayaou, who had faced Kazuno of the Drunken Fist Style, had broken bones across her entire body.

Deyiaoe Hinse, in her battle against Konoko of the Mist Shadow Style, had almost had her windpipe crushed, along with taking a blow to her head. Even then, she was still better off than the others.

Deyiaoe Utto had gotten off relatively lightly in her fight with Ran of the Silver Demon Style, having only suffered a heavy blow to her stomach.

Magyan Toris had suffered the most severe injuries in her match against Saiga Mizu. She was so badly hurt that even listing her injuries made one wince in sympathy.

As such, Baigo Shiyoki should probably consider herself fortunate for suffering only dislocated joints in her fight with Sansui Shirokuro.

In a tent right next to the dueling ground, the defeated warriors were being treated as their high-ranking kin looked on worriedly. While they may not have been strong enough to claim the thrones of their homelands, the princesses had been among the more powerful members of their royal families. Now, they lay in the tent being used to demonstrate the effectiveness of Arcanian Mysticism.

Their injuries were so severe that without treatment they could have died or been left with permanent disabilities. In a literal way, to them, love was a battlefield. Though, that's really not what the phrase is supposed to mean.

"We've finished treating the others. However, Princess Magyan Toris is…too badly injured to heal just with the Mystic Arts."

"Then let us give her juice from the Divine Ginseng. Given how badly injured she is, she should be able to handle the juice from an entire root."

The shimmering light of Mystic healing quickly healed serious and minor wounds alike. For injuries that couldn't be healed using Mysticism, the Divine Ginseng was used instead. The legendary fruit, which could even regenerate lost limbs, quickly healed the injuries sustained by the fighters. Having watched the healing unfold before their eyes, the guests recognized the sheer value of what Tahlan had brought back to his homeland.

"That was a hell of a sight," Magyan Khan said to Tahlan and Heki as he looked over the princesses that had suffered as living proof of the unimaginable sights they had seen earlier in the day.

The scenes felt like something out of a nightmare, but the princesses lying there receiving treatment were testament to the fact that those events had happened.

"The first four… Well, I figured people like that existed somewhere in the world, but…Ran, Saiga, and Sansui were impossibly strong."

"Yeah, I feel bad for saying it this way, big bro, but I never imagined it'd be this one-sided," Heki said, nodding in agreement at his father's statement.

The Arcanians had been far more powerful than he could have imagined, and the royals of the neighboring kingdoms also had no choice but to agree with that observation. Previously, the royals of Magyan had been convinced beyond any doubt that they were far more powerful than anyone else in the world.

However, the world was much larger than they'd imagined. The last three probably could have defeated the king himself. Indeed, they could probably have taken on every single one of the royals and their guests at once and still come out victorious.

“Father. As one without the Royal Presence, I have no right to speak about how Spirit Summoning should be used. But, what’s important…is that this is the result of a public and fair duel.”

Those were very difficult words for Sukreen and her supporters to hear, as Tahlan simply stated that this lopsided result was the furthest extent of their strength.

He concluded simply, “Sunae is probably right.”

As she had said, Spirit Summoners were neither the strongest nor were they invincible. They were wielders of a relatively rare Art, but that was all that they were. There was no longer any basis for anyone to dispute that claim.

“Father, I’ve always been proud of the fact that I was born as a royal and with the Royal Presence. However…” Sunae picked up where her brother left off, putting voice to a sad truth. “If I’m honest, there have been times when I’ve envied Tahlan for his Shadow Summoning. When fighting anything other than a Spirit Summoner or a Marked, there was never an occasion where I, as a Spirit Summoner, had an overwhelming advantage.”

The moment one left Magyan and its surrounding countries, the old truths no longer applied. Sunae, like the other members of her family, had once believed that achieving the largest and most powerful Divine Beast form was the only answer in the pursuit of true strength, but that was a mistaken conclusion drawn from incomplete information. Strength wasn’t something that was decided entirely by the individual. Strength was dependent on other variables, like the environment, the opponent, and the circumstances.

“Shadow Summoning has, despite being considered inferior to Spirit Summoning, survived to this point regardless. Isn’t that actually proof of Shadow Summoning’s effectiveness?”

Shadow Summoners couldn’t ever defeat Spirit Summoners. Moreover, in this region, there were no other Arts other than Shadow Summoning and Spirit Summoning. In spite of that fact, the practice of Shadow Summoning had never died out.

“Spirit Summoning is particularly suited for single combat. However, Shadow Summoners can adapt to just about every other situation. That is why they were practiced together in every kingdom around the region. Is that not so?”

Shadow Summoning’s survival as an Art meant that it had uses beyond simply being effective against those with no Arts at all. It was something that Sunae herself had experienced countless times firsthand.

“Mother.”

After a long pause, Sukreen replied, “What is it, Sunae?”

“We are merely human.”

Sunae spoke a very difficult truth.

“Even if our Divine Spirits are great creatures, we who borrow their strength are only human. We can be outmatched and defeated by wielders of other Arts…”

Sunae remembered Suiboku’s confession. He had continually shown an absolute superiority in ability to his own brother apprentice. She had seen in him a monster that could simultaneously control natural disasters like his own limbs and wield a blade like the manifestation of a god of war. She also knew just how dedicated he had been in the pursuit of his skill.

“Mother, we royals with the Royal Presence are special people. Generations of those special people have tested themselves, sharpened their skills, and learned from one another. Of course our skills are strong. Yet, in spite of that…there are people with even greater gifts than us, and they, too, have dedicated themselves to their Arts.”

Having seen Suiboku, Sunae couldn’t claim with a straight face that she was strong or that she had truly made an effort to become stronger.

“Let us accept it, mother. We are strong. However, there are more powerful opponents in this world, and there are those who are improving themselves in different ways than we do. If, in the distant future, this kingdom were invaded by forces from a different region…”

“That…”

Everyone present understood the gravity of the situation because they had seen Spirit Summoners get badly beaten in public. It would have been one thing had it only been the last three fighters, but they had even lost to the relatively ordinary skills of the first four duelists.

Even against ordinary practitioners of foreign Arts, elite Spirit Summoners were unable to put up a fight. Not only had the important guests from the other kingdoms seen it, but so had the people of Magyan. No doubt word would spread from the spectators to the other people of the kingdom.

“That’s why you did this?!”

As such, the two children who were going to leave the royal family had thrown mud upon the royal family’s authority as they departed.

“If this region is invaded by a foreign army, this kingdom and all the others will be conquered?!”

Sukreen raged at what was going to happen in the immediate future, rather than any hypothetical distant future.

“When will that be? How many years, decades, or centuries from now will that be?!”

Sukreen couldn’t forgive the fact that her own son and daughter had tarnished the present, the present that she valued more than anything else.

“Why is that for us to worry about?!”

“It’s too late to do anything once it becomes a reality! My retainers, my fiancé, and Sansui didn’t just come up with tactics to face Spirit Summoners in a single night! Of course, I was the one who taught them how to fight a Spirit Summoner…”

“Then that’s why we lost! You humiliated me in front of the public!”

It was all over. Sukreen’s ambitions were at an end. This was the end of her hopes of making Tahlan king.

“Royal authority is more important than life itself! And yet, Sunae, you…”

“Mother, I…”

“SILENCE!”

Magyan Khan’s roar rumbled so loudly that it seemed the ground itself shook from his rage.

“Sukreen, what in the blazes are you going on about?! Why are you making such sniveling excuses in front of the women that you gathered, that you invited, and who fought for your sake?!”

As king of Magyan, he brought up the most important fact of the moment.

“How dare you try to play the victim?! Your first duty is to apologize to them! To reward their dedication! Isn’t it?!”

It was impossible to believe that this rage came from a man who had been an invalid mere days earlier. The kingdom’s most powerful man roared, chastising his woman for embarrassing herself.

“This was the result of Our promise! You agreed to those terms!”

“B-But… The authority of the Royal Presence, of Spirit Summoning…”

“You wanted the duels held in my presence to be fixed?! Line up a bunch of average opponents and have them fight half-assed?!”

“B-But… The damage to our history…”

“If you don’t want to lose, don’t fight to begin with!”

The king displayed his pride as the ruler of a kingdom of warriors.

“If losing is shameful, then are winners shaming their opponents?! Damn that logic! Don’t turn fights into such a pitiful thing!”

The raging king was comforting and thanking the defeated. Or, rather, he was yelling at the top of his lungs for their honor: the honor of the women who had faced unknown, powerful opponents without backing down.

“Listen and listen well! There’s no shame in the weak running away! The shame comes when someone who declared that they’d fight, that they were strong, runs away and refuses to fight a more powerful opponent! All of your warriors fought without running! What’s there for them to be ashamed of?! What?! Are you going to fight those three to avenge their shame?!”

“That…”

“Then be silent! You, a strong woman who hasn’t the nerve to fight, have no right to speak!”

If the present was important, then the women who had just fought in the present were the ones that the king had to treat with respect. That was the very foundation of respect.

“That’s the most important thing, isn’t it?! You’re the one that’s gotten it wrong!”

A long silence follows before Sukreen manages a reply.

“My apologies.”

“You’re the one who’s shamed me! Get lost!”

Having been dismissed by the king, Sukreen had no place here. All she could do was bow and make her exit. The set of her back conveyed the pitiful air of the defeated.

“Sunae, you’ve found a good man.”

“Yes.”

“Tahlan, you’ve found a good teacher.”

“Yes.”

Everyone present had the strength to fight as a warrior. That was why they all knew that everyone who had fought today had put in a great deal of effort to attain their strength.

“Talent, circumstances… These are minor things. The ones you’ve brought to your side have all put in the effort to get stronger. They have always continued to grow stronger.”

Saiga was a good example of that. There was no need for him to get as strong as he did. Moreover, he had clearly taken it easy against his opponent. He had taken it easy on her, and yet he had also utterly destroyed her. Even if he was blessed with God-given ability, he was still impossibly strong. It was proof that he had fought and clawed his way to getting stronger.

“Heki!”

“Y-Yep!”

“And you others… Listen carefully!”

Magyan Khan, as king of Magyan, was assigning a test to his children.

“We can’t just let them get away with a win! In ten years… No, in five years! You’ll gather up retainers that can put Sunae’s to shame and we’re going to Arcana! It’ll be time to bloody their noses for a change!”

If they had lost in battle, then all that they needed to do was fight and win the next time. They needed to become stronger as a kingdom so that they didn’t repeat the same mistakes.

“Things are getting interesting! Hey, hey! We’re gonna get so strong that we’ll turn around and invade your country next!”

A strong king doesn’t stay defeated. No, a strong king, if defeated, trained so that they wouldn’t lose a second time. That was what it meant to be a strong ruler.

Part 18 — Resolution

The night after the royal exhibition, the participants were invited to a special banquet hosted by Magyan Khan. The scale of the banquet showed the reverence in which royal exhibitions were held and participation was an honor reserved solely for those who fought in the duels. It was also an opportunity to interact directly with the strongest man in the kingdom, and a chance to hear his unvarnished opinion.

“Thanks for rubbing all sorts of mud on my face!”

It also meant that the king could pretty much say what he wanted.

Khan picked his daughter’s fiancé up by the collar and lifted him off the ground without standing from his seat. His expression was one of unadulterated anger. Ordinarily his sons or daughters would have stepped in to stop him, but none of the participants in the royal exhibition had the right to do so. The Arcanians also already knew he was probably going to say something along those lines, and so they felt that they were in no position to step in.

“You better be ready for the consequences!”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

“Ehh?! What happened to that attitude you had during the match?!”

“I’m sorry! Please forgive me!”

“A man shouldn’t be so quick to apologize!”

“Please stop!”

“You went way too far to be let off so easily!”

If Saiga wanted to, he could easily dispatch the king. However, Saiga himself knew he was at fault, so he wasn’t able to put up much in the way of resistance.

“Sansui! You need to do a better job of disciplining your apprentice!”

“My apologies.”

“Damn right! If you hadn’t apologized before the match, I would have killed him on the spot!”

Sansui bowed low on the ground, apologizing in the same way he had done before his own duel. The two with the most overwhelming strength among the participants were extremely humble and apologetic. Viewing the bizarre spectacle unfolding before them, the princesses who had fought for Sukreen were at a loss for words.

“Tch… Not that I can say too much given the nonsense Sukreen was spouting, so I suppose I’ll let you off easy this time.”

The fourteen participants and Magyan Khan were seated in a small room, at least by Magyan standards. The king irritably scarfed down the lavish dishes laid out in front of them, even as he also gulped down huge mouthfuls of wine. At this rate, he was going to eat and drink everything in the room by himself.

“You have my sincere apologies.”

“You’re the heir to House Batterabbe or whatever in Arcana, right? Then don’t go around blabbing what you feel like that.”

He had wanted to say those words right after the exhibition had ended, but given Sunae and Sukreen’s argument, he hadn’t had the opportunity.

“Siyanchi Envee. Siyanchi Kesri. Donzila Gayaou. Deyiaoe Hinse. You fought well against opponents you knew nothing about. It’s not that you were weak. It probably would have ended in a similar way if I’d been the one fighting. Don’t let the outcome bother you too much.”

Magyan Khan carefully offered words of appreciation and praise to the princesses who had been caught up in his own wife’s machinations. He did so because that was the least he owed to them for fighting in his exhibition.

“Deyiaoe Utto, it’s true that you lost to a Marked. However, even I wouldn’t have been able to beat her. That’s how absurdly strong your opponent was. There’s no shame in your loss.”

Ran of the Silver Demon Style, having been described as absurdly strong by the kingdom’s greatest warrior, looked pleased, even though she wasn’t being praised directly.

The girls from Tempera also looked on proudly at her. Having learned self-control and overcome her own struggles, Ran had finally earned unstinting praise and respect.

“Toris, I’m proud of you for standing your ground. You deserve all sorts of praise for not turning around and running from someone as broken as him.”

There was nothing fair about an opponent who was able to use every single Art under the sun, and given the sheer battle lust he had shown, he must have been terrifying to face. Just resisting the urge to flee was an accomplishment in and of itself.

“Baigo Shiyoki… How did it feel to fight the Arcana Kingdom’s greatest warrior?”

“I felt there was no way I could beat him.”

“I bet... Just what was that...? Just how did he do it...?”

It was precisely because he had such keen senses that he understood that Sansui hadn’t overwhelmed his opponent with speed or power. Instead, he had overwhelmed his opponent despite the fact that he was both slower and weaker. Even looking on from the outside, Khan couldn’t understand how Sansui was able to completely overwhelm Shiyoki. But, even so, he could see that there was some kind of logic underlying Sansui’s strength. It wasn’t coincidence or some strange Art; it was simply logic rooted in fighting techniques.

Khan glanced back at the kowtowing Sansui. There was nothing about him that looked strong. He was a very humble and even modest figure.

“Ah well... If you’re the strongest, then I can rest easy.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“Seems Tahlan’s been learning quite a bit from you… What do you think of him?”

“He was a remarkable swordsman even before he came to me. All I’ve done is helped him in his efforts.”

“I see.”

Sansui was far too humble to make for interesting conversation. Still, Khan understood that any further questions would yield little in the way of answers.

“Once again, you have my apologies and my thanks. It should’ve been up to Heki and the others to deal with the succession issue. But instead, you all wound up getting caught up in it. It’s because I couldn’t keep my wife in line. Forgive me.”

Siblings would naturally fight over the right to claim the throne, and there were times when blood siblings would kill each other in the course of that fighting. However, none of the people who fought for him this time were his children. Because of that, he had to apologize.

“Really, Sukreen’s plotting… That’s just a part of the squabbling over the succession, but…I can’t just dismiss it as something that I could do nothing about. It really is all on me. Including all of the shameful behavior.”

Sukreen had only concerned herself with her own interests, not her reputation, even in front of the defeated warriors and their families. If Khan hadn’t chastised her in public, it could very well have ended up as a major diplomatic incident.

“Listen up… Saiga, you in particular.”

“Yes, sir…”

“Don’t just straight-out say whatever it is you’re thinking.”

Khan’s words were far too on the nose to argue with. True, there was a certain simple virtue to speaking one’s mind without hiding anything, but even that virtue had its limits.

“People are all caught up in their own problems. Sure, it’s irritating to have your plans dashed in front of your eyes. But…you don’t air those feelings in front of other people. There’s nothing more embarrassing or humiliating.”

Khan himself felt that royal authority had been damaged. While he had praised the combatants in the first four duels, he was still conflicted about the outcome. However, it would only compound the humiliation if he had reacted petulantly to those victories.

“Being strong means you’re also setting an example. It means you have to always be someone who people look up to. That’s what it means to be king. No matter what you’re feeling, you have to always put on that act.”

Even if he was simmering with rage, he needed to put on a brave facade and laugh off his shock, making certain to hide those feelings from those around him. There was nothing more embarrassing than throwing a tantrum after losing.

“Obviously, you look impressive when you win. A king, a grown man, needs to look impressive even when he loses.”

He gulped down his wine and took a breath.

“Which is why a king needs wine, meat, and women. So he can forget his frustrations! And if those distractions aren’t enough, then the king needs to fob off his throne onto the next poor son of a bitch.”

His listeners knew that Khan’s words referred not only to himself, but to someone else who wasn’t present. The seven princesses that Sukreen had gathered listened in silence.

“That is why I allowed Tahlan to leave the country. He’s too sensitive, that boy. He knows just how women want him to act, so he can’t help but act that way. It’s not that he’s fooling them, but his desire to please them just keeps drawing women to him, and those women just keep chasing the ideal man, not the actual man underneath.”

Even a strong king has things that bother him, but his role is to bear them and laugh them off as though they don’t bother him at all. Even the best of men get frustrated by things in their lives. It’s those times when they look for solace in a woman’s arms. Magyan Khan therefore understood Tahlan’s struggles.

“I’m in full support of his marriage. He’s got a good eye for judging people. If he says he wants that twisted woman, then that’s his choice. As for Sunae… Well, I’ll have to wait and see.”

“I’m sorry…”

“Like I keep telling you, don’t apologize. If you’re going around being all apologetic, that makes things worse for the people who’ve lost to you. I’m telling you to at least put on a show of being a bigger man.”

Khan sternly lectured Saiga so that he wouldn’t act in a way that irritated the people around him. He was telling Saiga to act the part of the victor, the part of a powerful warrior, regardless of what it was that he felt in his heart.

“If you’re feeling apologetic, then don’t bow your head, but bring a gift or something.”

“Maybe some gold, then?”

“Who the hell needs that?! I saw how good your Mystics are at healing. They’re ridiculously useful. I want some of them. You all agree, don’t you?”

The seven women who had actually received treatment from the Mystics nodded in agreement. An Art that could heal people’s ailments was worth its weight in gold. It was incredibly valuable, and worthy of Tahlan’s efforts to bring it to this region.

“Still, we can’t just go around adopting foreign things willy-nilly. Have your Mystics find those people in this kingdom with that talent, then we’ll send them to you for training. You’re not going to object, are you?”

Khan himself wanted to also select candidates from the other kingdoms as well. That would probably be enough to make up for this embarrassing incident.

“Well, as for that…I’d need to ask House Caputo…”

“Screw that! How many months will it take to get that approval?!”

Saiga was the heir to House Batterabbe, but he couldn't answer for House Caputo, who handled the selection and training of healers in Arcana. Not that such things were Khan's concern...

"I'm telling you to offer something in contrition! The least you can do is deal with that on your end!"

"Yes! I'll do my best!"

"All right, you said it! Make damn sure you do!"

Sansui watched with admiration as Khan made use of intimidation as a form of diplomacy. It was hard to tell which side had started the intimidation, so in a way, Saiga had brought this on himself.

"Now, Sansui. Is it true that it's your master that made the Divine Ginseng, Coiled Peaches, and noble treasures?"

"Yes. As it says in the manifest, they were crafted by Suiboku, my master."

"Can you make them?"

"I cannot. I don't know how."

"Tch."

Khan was clearly disappointed by the answer. Having seen how well those items worked, he naturally wanted more of them. There weren't that many Coiled Peaches or that much Divine Ginseng among the treasures that the Arcana Kingdom had given to Magyan.

"Is it something you can learn quickly?"

"No. Even if I started now, everyone here would have died of old age by the time I completed any of them."

"Right. I hear you're an Immortal. How old are you?"

"Approximately five hundred years old. I'm still young by Immortal standards. My master is evidently about four thousand years old."

"I see..."

The king of Magyan and the princesses of the neighboring kingdoms could find nothing to say to that revelation. It was probably true that Sansui had been training since before Magyan even existed as a kingdom, but they couldn't understand why he'd be serving a mortal.

"Even if you found another Immortal, they might not be able to make noble treasures, Coiled Peaches, or Divine Ginseng. My master is capable of wielding just about any school of the Immortal Arts, but I'm told an ordinary Immortal focuses their efforts on mastering a single school."

"Meaning, what we've got is all we'll get, eh... Ah, well."

If it simply was not possible, there was no choice but to give up on acquiring more. If Khan went out of his way to look for them, no doubt it'd just leave him empty-handed and his efforts would go to waste.

"If you're Tahlan's teacher, then go teach the Shadow Summoners. You'll be staying here at least six months, after all."

"I'll do what I can as time allows..."

"You're also Tahlan's bride's bodyguard, yeah? In that case, yeah, you might not have much free time."

At any rate, the conversation had evidently run its course. The winners had won respect for both their skill and for the fear they instilled, while the defeated side had been praised for not running in the face of an unknown threat. Everyone present would be able to walk out with their future intact.

The recent royal exhibition was likely to go down in history as a significant event. Whether or not the machinations behind it would ever come to light was one thing, but the outcome would likely be the stuff of legends, even in the neighboring kingdoms. That meant, of course, that the event would be remembered in history, as Sukreen had hoped. Of course, it was completely the opposite of what she intended, but it would still be remembered.

"Tahlan, Sunae!"

There is a saying that the greatest hatred stems from the greatest love. Sukreen, who had been wallowing in her frustrations in her chambers, now spat her hatred at her two children. She had nothing left. She was going to lose her children to another kingdom, she had lost the love of the king, and she even had lost her connections to the neighboring realms.

"Mother…"

"Why?! Why are you two getting in my way?!"

The siblings looked upon their mother sadly as she was in the throes of her rage. They had known that this was going to be the outcome, but they still would have preferred not to see her in this state. However, if they hadn't taken the necessary steps, the kingdom would have been split in half. No expression of pleasure, no smile of approval, was worth sundering the kingdom.

"Why won't you use the forces you brought to claim the throne?!"

They had saved the kingdom by sacrificing their mother's ambitions, and the only real damage had been to Sukreen's position and influence. Even so, the two couldn't take any pleasure in that knowledge.

"Don't you agree that this kingdom's laws are flawed?! Don't you agree that it's wrong that simply not having the Royal Presence is enough to remove a prince from the line of succession?! When a man like you, Tahlan —a great man—can't become king, it's the kingdom that's wrong, not you!"

She wasn't necessarily wrong. It was possible to be a great king, to create a prosperous kingdom, even without the Royal Presence. The siblings were well aware of that. But by that logic, Sukreen herself was hardly worthy of the power she aspired to wield.

"Mother."

"What is it?!"

"Please stop troubling me."

Tahlan thus ruthlessly cut down the ambitions of the woman who was his mother. In truth, he should have done it much earlier. If he had, he could have at least kept things from spiraling out of control.

“Wh-What are you…”

“I’m saying that I do not want to be king.”

“S-Surely that’s only because of your concern for others, yes…? You’ve never said you don’t want to be king before…”

She was right. There was a part of Tahlan that had always clung to the idea of being king. That he had never voiced that desire was surely out of concern for those around him. However, there was no point in revealing that now. Things had progressed far past the point of discussing their unattained hopes and laughing about it. Sukreen had simply gone too far.

“Mother, allow me to be blunt. I will settle in the Arcana Kingdom and live out my life there. I came back to give you that news.”

“Why?! Why won’t you understand what I’m trying to do?!”

Sukreen’s pleas were heart-wrenching for the siblings. The two of them had seen others behave the same way as their mother: the foolish émigré nobles of the Domino Empire, who had believed that the imperial crown and their titles held importance above all other things.

“I’m only thinking about your happiness! You should be king! Surrounded by many women! And cheered by the populace! That is where you would be happiest!”

“What about that is laudable in a king?”

Sukreen’s idea of happiness was shallow and devoid of any thought.

“Is that what you believe a king should be, mother?”

“Wh-What’s wrong with…”

“Mother, I…”

As a simple fact, that was who Tahlan had been: the ideal prince who had captured countless hearts.

“I’m tired of playing a role for women. I’m sick of it.”

“Huh?”

“Did you not hear what I said? I wish to marry and be a simple man who finds solace in one woman.”

Sukreen likely had always wanted to be the mother of the ideal prince, but Tahlan couldn’t satisfy that desire, for he wanted nothing more than to be just a man.

Sukreen couldn’t believe what she was hearing from Tahlan. He had never said anything that harsh to his mother before.

“I wanted to change this kingdom! For you! Because I always felt so guilty that you had no claim to the throne!”

“Do you think I can truly respect someone who doesn’t care if putting me on the throne starts a civil war? Who doesn’t care how many of our people die as a result?”

“No, Tahlan! I did all of this for you! Just for you!” Sukreen pleaded her case and tried desperately to defend her actions. She didn’t mind hating her children, but she couldn’t stand the thought of her children, of Tahlan in particular, hating her.

“Then would you have given up on that dream if you knew it would cause a civil war?”

“I-I…”

“Would you have let go of that dream if you knew it’d cost innocent lives?”

Sukreen remained silent.

“Please, answer me.”

“I-If it was for you, I…”

“You believed, no, you *believe* that it is worth the lives of the kingdom’s citizens as long as it makes me king, don’t you?”

“I…”

“If that’s the case, then say it. Say it in front of me, in front of our retainers, in front of our people, in front of your supporters.”

There was no way she could ever say such a thing.

“Why can’t you say it?”

“That’s because…if I did…I…”

She was frightened by Tahlan at that moment. He had never been a child who could say something like this.

“I wanted… For you…”

Sukreen hadn’t, perhaps couldn’t, realize that she was the one making him say these things.

“Brother, enough, please. Mother won’t hear your words.”

Sunae stopped her brother. There was no point in continuing this debate for either side.

“Sunae… I…I need to disown mother.”

“Even if you no longer try to please her, there’s no need to hate her, either. Let us go, brother.”

Sukreen believed that she was justified in whatever she did so long as it was for her children. For someone who was so certain of her cause, there was no space for compromise or agreement.

“Yes. You’re right.”

“Let us go, brother.”

“W-Wait, both of you! I, your mother, am telling you to stay!”

Sunae and Tahlan turned to leave, a clear look of disappointment on their faces. Even still, Sukreen tried desperately to make them stay.

“I-I…”

She tried to find the words that would stop them from leaving, but there were no words that could stop those who were prepared to be hated for their actions.

“Why aren’t you concerned about my fate?!”

The pair left the room without so much as a glance backward. Sukreen continued to yell at them, but the siblings stood firm in their conviction.

“My, my… Such a passionate mother.”

Douve, who had been waiting outside the room, took Tahlan’s hand. As usual, she had a pleased smile on her lips.

“I’m embarrassed that you had to hear that… Douve.”

“Now, now, we’ve both seen each other’s embarrassing parts.”

Douve was in complete control of Tahlan’s frailties, those frailties that he showed only her. When he showed her his vulnerabilities, Douve embraced him and didn’t let go.

When he had returned to his homeland, that was what he had hoped his mother would do for him. He hadn’t wanted a gift like the throne; rather, all he had wanted was for her to greet him as family, as his father and siblings had done. He just wanted an ordinary embrace from his mother. Sukreen couldn’t provide that for him.

“Hrmph.”

It was hard for anyone to voice things they didn’t want to admit were true. Even after witnessing this exchange, Sunae couldn’t bring herself to praise Douve’s love for her brother.

After the banquet with Magyan Khan, the five girls from Tempera, Eckesachs, Douve’s father, and Sansui sat in a room reflecting on the day’s battles. They avoided asking about Douve and Tahlan’s whereabouts. All it would do was annoy the Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda.

“Perhaps it’s not my place to say, but you did well.”

In a sense, it was perfectly natural for the two aces and Ran, who was close to them in power, to have won their duels. However, there had been no real guarantee that the four Temperans were going to win their matches. Had things played out just a little differently, they would have been the ones who were being treated by the Mystic healers. Even setting that aside, it took a great deal of courage to fight giant beasts.

Accounting for all of those factors, the Lord Emeritus offered words of praise to the four fighters, even though they were technically vassals of House Batterabbe.

“Thank you, however…”

“It’s hard to feel like we actually won.”

“We’re not as happy as we thought we would be.”

“It feels a bit like we were given our wins…”

They didn’t feel that they could bask in their victory. While they had achieved their goal of showing their skill in a foreign land, they couldn’t bring themselves to celebrate.

“I, too, am a warrior. I understand what you’re trying to say. There is a difference between fighting and winning, after all.”

The Lord Emeritus understood how they felt. He sympathized with their inability to process their own victories.

“It was hard to say that they were equal battles. Yes, they were public fights under publicly agreed-upon rules, but it wasn’t a fight on equal terms. Winning, when you *must* win, was undoubtedly not fun for you. Or, rather, if

you enjoyed such a thing, no doubt you wouldn't feel the need to continue your training."

The underlying logic behind these duels meant that attacking a sleeping opponent or ambushes were marks of the most powerful fighters. It's true that those circumstances were always worthy of concern, and there would always be a demand for such tactics. In fact, the Mist Shadow Style was even predicated on subterfuge, and it was one of its strengths. However, since they were all martial artists at heart, they weren't pleased at resorting to such subterfuge.

"However, how you feel has nothing to do with my praise. Leave your frustrations in your own hearts. You did what you needed to do."

The Arcanians had fought the exhibition without telling the opponent about their fighting styles. While it wouldn't have been a problem for the last three to have their fighting styles known, it was possible that their opponents could have come up with responses against the first four. Because they were aware of that fact, they couldn't rejoice in their victories.

However, results were results. Even if they weren't pleased with their wins, they had completed their mission. That was worthy of praise.

"Sansui, you fought well."

"You honor me."

"The name of House Sepaeda will be spoken of in the same breath as your strength. The same goes for your master, Suiboku."

"You do me far too much honor."

The Lord Emeritus praised Sansui, who sat quietly. He had maintained a respectful attitude while showing both his skill and character.

"You really have gotten stronger. In the past, you would have had to wait for your enemy to tire or otherwise have immediately taken them down."

"That is all thanks to my master's instruction."

"Once again, it shows how far you have yet to travel. It was as impressive as ever."

Sansui showed in the duel that he had more tools at his disposal. With those techniques, he could now adapt his tactics to his opponent and the situation. When fighting in front of Douve, he had overwhelmed his opponent with variations of Flash Step, while in front of Magyan Khan, he had used World Manipulation to win with a flourish. He still lacked flashiness, but he had grown much stronger.

There was also the small fact that displays of flashiness from the Immortal Arts might very well destroy an entire country. Suiboku had destroyed entire countries while practicing in the past.

"My master is perhaps the ultimate example of a man who trained not to kill or to win but simply to fight. All I am is strong, but my master can do just about anything."

"Don't be dismissive of your own ability. That sort of omnipotence isn't what we want of you."

It’s true that Suiboku was capable of just about anything, far more than even Sansui had imagined. Perhaps it was because Suiboku was nigh-omnipotent that he had accidentally destroyed those countries in the past.

Even setting aside his ability to create Coiled Peaches and Divine Ginseng, there were numerous useful techniques such as Needle Puncturing and Acupuncture at his disposal, Arts that had enormous practical value. Suiboku had demonstrated those techniques while staying in the Arcana Kingdom, and it was those techniques, the ones that seemed to have nothing to do with being the ultimate swordsman or the ultimate Immortal, that had captured the hearts of so many Arcanian women.

It was perfectly understandable that, not knowing how powerful he actually was, people might try to keep him in their kingdom and try to make use of him. Of course, trying to force him to stay would wake a sleeping giant capable of wielding natural disasters. The country in question would then literally be making an enemy of a walking natural disaster. They wouldn’t even have time to regret their decision before they were destroyed.

“People just need to be able to fulfill one task that they’re given. It’s fine if you can’t create anything like the noble treasures. You have plenty of ability as a swordsman. That is nothing for you to be ashamed of.”

Yes, there was something to be said for being nearly omnipotent. That was particularly true if that included abilities unique to that person. However, there was no need for anyone to actually achieve that. Even if Sansui had nothing else to distinguish him other than his swordsmanship, there was no problem with that.

“Thank you.”

“In your case, I understand that because your master is your goal, you have high aspirations. However, you’re currently a retainer of House Sepaeda. If that’s your role, then you should have pride in your skill with the sword.”

“Thank you.”

The truth was, if Sansui was dismissive of his own ability, then no one else would have any cause to be confident in anything. It was important for others that Sansui help lower the bar a bit from his impossibly high standards.

“Mm?”

Sansui suddenly glanced around suspiciously. It seemed he had sensed something, and he alone responded, in what seemed to be an ordinary, empty room.

“Sorry to trouble you, but can you tell me what you know about the Marionette Style?” Sansui suddenly asked out of nowhere. He had addressed the question to the Temperans in the room. Had the users of the Consecrated Maiden Arts done something? “Does the Marionette Style have a method of controlling animals?”

“Yes. Wielders of the Marionette Style often control dogs or cats or birds.”

“I don’t know the details, but yes, I believe there is such a technique.”

“I think they kept several animals as pets…”

“I’m sorry, we don’t know a lot about the other houses…”

“Eckesachs… How about you?” Sansui then tried asking the hitherto silent Eckesachs. She probably had some knowledge about the subject, but she was in an incredibly pouty mood and Sansui found it difficult to speak to her.

“There was such a method. I think,” Eckesachs replied without much interest.

There was the distinct possibility that these kinds of circumstances were the only times she was useful. If she showed off her knowledge, the others might very well start treating her more as an encyclopedia rather than a sword, so perhaps that’s why she was answering so vaguely.

“What of it?”

“The Consecrated Maidens seem to have sent something like a mouse in our direction.”

“Oh, is that it?” Eckesachs said as though it had triggered a memory. “It could be people from Tengu Village.”

“Tengu? You mean the supernatural monster?”

“It would be one thing if this was the old world, but there’s no such thing in this new world,” Eckesachs, who had recovered from her funk, corrected Sansui.

“Tengu refers to those who have mastered the path of Shugendo. While they go by a different name, they’re Immortals like you. Among them…there’s a particular Tengu who has long watched over a bloodline of Consecrated Maidens.”

“A Tengu protecting a bloodline of Consecrated Maidens, I see…”

A long-lived individual, protecting a bloodline that wasn’t suited to direct combat. Yes, that sounded like something that might happen from time to time. Neither Suiboku nor Sansui were of that temperament, but they could do it if they so desired.

“The Tengu knows both the Eight Sacred Treasures and Suiboku… Perhaps they’re coming to greet you, Suiboku’s apprentice.”

Perhaps they had sent the mouse as a prank. That had been a concern, and it wasn’t completely implausible, but it seemed unlikely. Sansui had left the room to check, and he encountered a situation that was clearly not intended as a prank.

“Hey, the mouse isn’t listening to us!”

“No matter how many times I try to send it somewhere, it starts nibbling on something hard and won’t move!”

“Hey! This mouse is really really skinny! It’s too hungry to do anything!”

“Then feed it before you send it somewhere! Why can’t you do things more efficiently?!”

“Whose idea was it to use a mouse to talk to them in the first place?!”

“It took way too long to find a mouse, and it took way too long to put the mouse under our spell! This sucks!”

“We could’ve just talked to them normally! Sheesh, think, people!”

“Dummy! We picked a fight with the apprentice of that Great Tengu, remember?!”

“Hey, what are you doing?”

Evidently, while they could control small animals, they couldn’t manage complete control over that animal. Further, they hadn’t actually planned it all that carefully. Instead, it seemed they had chosen the mouse as an emergency measure. As Sansui entered the room where the presence came from, he was greeted with the loud quarreling of female voices, which he had heard even from the hallway.

“Eeeeeep!”

“It’s Master Suiboku’s apprentice!”

“It’s the apprentice of the Great Tengu, who was known as the greatest and most powerful across all ages and all countries!”

“It’s the apprentice of the legendary berserker!”

“We’re gonna die! We’re all gonna die!”

Sansui was able to confirm that they were trying to get in touch with him, but he sighed as he heard once more about his own master’s terrible reputation. He couldn’t stay depressed at that news forever, though, so he straightened and looked at the Consecrated Maidens.

“All of you. I’m not here to take your lives, so tell me what you want. If not…I’ll just leave. Afterwards, I’ll ignore you from now on.”

Sansui stated his simple and serious demands to the group. Honestly, he would have preferred not to listen to them at all, but since this was his role, he needed to at least ask.

“If you don’t want me to leave, then pick someone to speak for you and talk.”

“I’m sorry to subject you to such an embarrassing sight, Master Sansui, O apprentice of Great Master Suiboku.”

The ten or so girls all kowtowed on the spot, and the one who was evidently in charge began to speak. It was nice that things were proceeding so quickly, and their behavior showed just what they thought of Immortals, or rather, Tengu.

“We’re very sorry for helping your enemies in our ignorance. Please forgive us.”

“That’s fine. I have no intention of blaming you for it.”

“Thank you so very much.”

“But uh… Were you trying to apologize?”

It’s true that, looked at objectively, they would naturally want to apologize for making an enemy of Suiboku’s apprentice. However, as Eckesachs had pointed out, it was a complete mystery why they had even been involved in Sukreen’s machinations. It seemed like they weren’t particularly enthusiastic participants, either…

“No, that’s not it. It’s very hard to say, but…”

“What?”

The girl said, extremely apologetically, “We could really use some money.”

Side Story — Example

Marriage was a ritual that existed across various human societies. This was also true of the Arcana Kingdom, and it was only after that ritual was conducted that a man and a woman were formally considered married. And like many other societies, having a child out of wedlock was considered dishonorable.

However, in the Arcana Kingdom, and in the House Sepaeda territories in particular, there was a notable exception to that rule. That was when the man who was engaged to be married was going on campaign and would be separated from his betrothed for a long period of time. The journey to Magyan would take Sansui on a year-long mission abroad. As such, it was treated the same as a military campaign, so he had permission to do what all young men and women do before such a journey. Though, of course, technically, Sansui wasn't a young man at all...

Sansui had departed for Magyan, and Blois, her siblings, and Lain had all returned to the Wynne family estate. For a while, Blois and Lain had spent their lives moving through the uneventful stupor of a daily routine, but that situation changed rather abruptly. Blois had suddenly fallen ill, revealing that she was with child. That quickly ejected Blois and Lain from anything like a routine.

"Miss Blois! You've made a baby?!"

"That's right!" Blois answered the curious Lain proudly.

Blois was finally able to provide results for Lain, who had wanted a younger brother or sister, but had no idea precisely how children came to be. To be able to tell Lain that she was going to be a big sister was something Blois had desperately wanted. While she hadn't formally married Sansui yet, she finally felt that she had accomplished something as a woman, rather than merely as a warrior. While it was just the first step, it was still a large first step toward achieving happiness as a family.

"Papa will be happy!"

"That's right!"

Sansui would surely be happy to learn he had a child on the way. It's true that he was a bit detached from the world, but surely he'd be happy about *this* .

"I knew this would happen but...it's hard not to be able to tell him."

Sansui was currently off under a far-distant sky, which was why they decided to create a child before marriage, but Blois couldn't help but feel disappointment at being unable to tell him the news.

"Should we ask Master Suiboku?"

"Let's not."

She was disappointed, but not enough to talk to Suiboku. Neither Blois nor Lain had actually seen Suiboku fight. However, everyone who had seen

him fight all said the same thing. The man was a monster. Even the leaders of the Arcana Kingdom found themselves at a loss on how to deal with him. Blois found it a bit too intimidating to ask Suiboku to go to the trouble of contacting Sansui just because she was pregnant.

“Besides, Master Suiboku is quite busy. While it’s a shame, it’ll have to be a secret for Sansui for a while longer.”

“Okaaay… How sad. Oh well.”

Lain was disappointed, but that was part of the deal. It’s not like Sansui was going to be gone for ten or twenty years, so the two decided to wait until Sansui returned.

“Hehe… So I’m going to be a big sister…”

Lain was extremely pleased at this development. She even felt a certain sense of accomplishment at the knowledge.

“Say, what’s a big sister supposed to do?”

“Um, well, I don’t know.”

Since Lain was going to be a big sister, she wanted to fulfill her role, but she couldn’t think of anything specific that she could do. Just what do big sisters do?

“But, Miss Blois, you have a big sister in Miss Chette, and you’re Lyra’s big sister, right? How do you not know?”

“Well, I was never home enough to really be a sister to them… I was always busy training with my magic and my sword to protect Lady Douve…”

Blois had both an older sister and a younger sister, but since she hadn’t spent much time with them, she didn’t know how sisters were supposed to behave toward one another. The two of them were at a loss as to what the answer was, but the speculation was fun for both of them.

“I know, Lain. Why don’t we go give the news to Lyra and ask her?”

“Yup! I’ll ask Lyra!”

Blois’s older sister Chette was already married and had a family of her own, while Hetter, Blois’s older brother, was extremely busy. But Lyra, her younger sister, probably didn’t have much to do. Blois and Lain decided to ask what Lyra, the youngest, thought about her older siblings.

Lyra Wynne sipped elegantly at her tea as she welcomed her older sister and niece into her room.

“Lyra… I’m pregnant!”

“Oh my! How wonderful, big sister! Congratulations!”

While the words were very much according to form, Lyra’s features and tone expressed sincere joy. Lyra smiled happily without overdoing it, and gestured with pleasure. The smart youngest sibling knew that it was best to celebrate normally at times like this.

“Right?!”

Lyra had gotten it completely right. Blois was nearly ecstatic at the congratulations.

“And how lovely for you, Lain! You’ll be a big sister soon!”

“That’s right!”

Her response to Lain was also perfect. There was no need for any artful words; she just needed to give them the normal words of congratulations and react happily. There was nothing better than to celebrate happy news.

“I’m sure Master Sansui will be happy too! It’ll be nice to see how pleased he’ll be when he gets home.”

Blois and Lain were entirely content with Lyra’s perfect response. It was almost enough to make them forget why they had come to her in the first place. It was true that they had wanted congratulations, of course, but that wasn’t their only goal. They wanted to have a bit of family talk too.

“Um, so, Lyra, I’m going to be a big sister, right? I want to be a great big sister for the baby!”

“My, my! You’re so enthusiastic!”

“Yup! So, what do you think a big sister should do?”

“Let’s see... Well, from my place as a little sister...”

Lain asked enthusiastically, and so Lyra humored her. Blois looked on happily as she felt everyone basking in the happy news. There was a lot of happiness here, ordinary family happiness.

“Oh, there you are, Lyra.”

“Oh, Blois and Lain are here too... Sorry, but we had something we needed to ask Lyra.”

The ones who interrupted that happiness were the two who were supposed to be busy at the moment. Like a splash of cold water, Chette, the eldest daughter, and Hetter, the eldest son, walked in. The three who had been rejoicing just a moment earlier felt a chill of apprehension as the two who were—for better or for worse—extremely motivated and hardworking in their particular fields, appeared.

“Well, Lyra... Ever since I’ve gotten back from the royal capital, I’ve been boasting about my beauty...! My beautiful skin, which is not only as supple as any young girl’s, but maybe even more radiant! Along with my lovely body!”

“O-Oh...”

“However, having done that, all the older ladies... They won’t stop asking me about my secret... It’s such a problem.”

Chette was in a state of ecstasy as she basked in the envy of the other ladies in the social scene. She probably did consider the attention something of a problem, but it was also true that she was enjoying the attention.

“But it’s started to get a little bothersome lately... Do you have any good ideas on what to do?”

“While you’re at it, will you listen to my problems as well, Lyra?”

After hearing his older sister’s problems, Hetter, the heir to the estate, then spoke with a serious expression, “As you know, the noble treasures that Master Suiboku crafted are extremely useful. In particular, the Wind-

Fire Wheels that allow flight are extremely safe, unlike wind or fire magic. There are quite a few people who want them…”

Unlike Chette, who was boasting while describing her problems, Hetter was all business. But his eyes also had an ambitious glint to them.

“Of course, I know the items aren’t supposed to be passed around, but there’ve been all sorts of inquiries from the local notables… Do you have any good ideas on how to deal with this?”

The much older brother and sister looked upon their youngest sister with intense trust, and Lyra couldn’t help but sigh at their problems. She didn’t look happy or entertained by the situation. Blois and Lain thus looked upon Lyra with a great deal of sympathy.

“Let’s see... First, Chette. If you tell the most influential and oldest of the ladies that the item that’s the secret to your beauty is strictly controlled by the king, and that it might even be impossible to ever get another sliver, never mind an entire Peach, I’m sure she’ll do everything in her power to help you.”

“True! All I have to do is let her think she might have a chance!”

It was a pretty cunning bit of advice, but Chette seemed extremely pleased by Lyra’s suggestion. It seemed that she was going to take her younger sister’s advice.

“As for you, Hetter. First, you need to not so easily yield to their pleas, and don’t say anything that gives them hope. Make sure you say no.”

“B-But…”

“It’s not like you can make them yourself, big brother. Trying to claim credit for someone else’s work will just tarnish your reputation. If you’re in a position to do something about it, then act at that point. That’s what it means to act honorably.”

“You’re right. I let my greed get the better of me.”

With that, the two of them left Lyra’s room. Of course, they gave their regards to Lain and Blois, but they showed no interest in why the two of them were there.

“So, Lain, we were talking about a proper big sister, right?”

“Yup…”

“The most important thing…is to not end up like that.”

Lain and Blois could only offer a dry laugh in response to Lyra’s perfect answer.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up the seventh volume of *The World's Least Interesting Master Swordsman.*

I only had a single page for the afterword in the last volume, and this time I get twice the space. It was really hard to write the afterword for the previous volume, as I only had eight lines aside from my usual greetings and thanks. I wasn't able to get across my passionate thoughts about the volume in just eight lines. Still, I'm not sure if the seventh volume's afterword is where I should be talking about the sixth volume, but let me indulge in one sentiment.

The illustration of Suiboku and Fukei sitting together was amazing! The illustration was even used in the advertising, and it was one that I begged and pleaded for. That's just how much that scene meant to me. It was something I'd always wanted to have drawn.

The reasons Fukei hated Suiboku were described in detail in the work itself. Suiboku himself was aware of those reasons, since he's got a laundry list of sins. However, it was probably hard to understand why Suiboku felt an affection for Fukei.

But that one illustration and the advert's line that "Suiboku had always indulged himself in just the beautiful memories" told it all. That one illustration encapsulated the entirety of Suiboku and Fukei's relationship. I have nothing but endless thanks to Shiso for drawing that illustration.

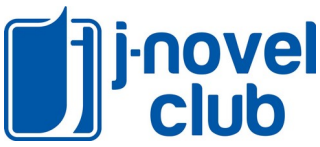
Now, about volume seven. This volume is a heavily rewritten version of the stories I had already published on Shosetsuka ni Naro, but there really is a big difference when you're writing each chapter as short stories and in making it into an entire volume.

It was hard enough for me, the author, to figure out what was going on when I was editing the text, so no doubt it must have been nearly impossible for the readers to figure out, and I'm sure it completely ruined any sense of immersion.

Since this is written for pleasure, it'd be a problem for the reader to get lost in the process, right? It really taught me the importance of structure.

Now, Shiso and Kuroda. Thank you so much for all the work you do for me. I look forward to continuing working with you in the future.

Rokurou Akashi



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The World’s Least Interesting Master Swordsman: Volume 7
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